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OR,
Clover Crookback's Police Puzzle.

BY WM. H. MANNING,
AUTHOR OF "OLD DOUBLEDARK," "WILD WEST
WALT," "DEEP DUKE," "BORDER BUL-
LET," "YANK YELLOWBIRD," ETC.

CHAPTER I.

THE EAST RIVER MYSTERY.

It was a wet, disagreeable night in the city of New York, and one man, at least, was in ill-humor. As he turned to ascend the steps of the Elevated Railway he encountered a newsboy who modestly presented a paper to his notice. He answered with a growl more animal than human, shoved the boy aside and went on his course.

The boy took the rebuff philosophically. He was working very late, and anxious to sell out his stock, but he had been growled at before. The covering to the stairs was welcome to him, but he was impressed with the idea that the man thought he had no business to be under cover.

Up went the man to the station. He purchased a ticket, dropped it in the box and passed the

"LOOK!" THE DETECTIVE EXCLAIMED; "THE RIVER MYSTERY IS THERE AGAIN!"

gate. The employee dumped the slip of paper into the maw of the box and looked more closely at the traveler.

The railroad man was lonesome. Rain was falling in that steady drizzle which makes weather so sticky and dismal. Travelers were scarce—a rare thing at the Fourteenth street station of the Third avenue line—and he felt that misery ought to make all men equal.

Looking at the new-comer, he saw a man of middle age, with bushy hair and beard peeping out from under a slouched, soft hat, and rough clothes buttoned closely around a figure remarkable for its circumference at the waist. Little of the face could be seen, but the stranger had a certain air of power which impressed the observer.

"Wet evening, sir!" he observed, politely.

"Uff!"

That was the only reply. It might have been any language but English, as far as the railroad man knew about it, but he was not to be discouraged.

"Not many folks out to-night," he added, as cheerfully as possible.

No reply.

"No signs of the weather clearing, are there?"

"Mind your own business!"

The traveler spoke at last, and in plain English, but it was in a way like a cross between the snap of a car and the growl of an ugly bear; and then he turned and walked away on the platform.

"Well, he is out of temper!"

So muttered the gateman, but the words were for his own ears, alone. He had had enough of the surly traveler. He used his divine right of survey, however, and wondered how a man must feel with such a waist on him as the stranger possessed. It was not the round, comfortable waist carried by most corpulent men, but a rough, knobby, uneven waist, with hills and hollows like a rolling prairie.

"There's a good deal of him," thought the observer, "but it ain't well distributed. No wonder he is ugly. If I was built that way, probably I should be surly and cranky."

Down from the north came a train, and, when it left the station, it took the surly man along with it. He did not grow more social. Finding a seat in a corner, he sat down, pulled his hat lower over his eyes and sat there like a bear fast asleep.

He kept the place until City Hall station was reached. When he left the train he did not descend to the street, but walked around and passed the gates of the Brooklyn Bridge. A few minutes later he was crossing the East River.

On this occasion he had a seat next to a solid business man. The latter was of good size, and he found himself in actual contact with his neighbor. He moved his elbow and accidentally touched the surly man somewhat heavily. He turned his head to apologize, but there was no encouragement in that way: the man from Fourteenth street was almost invisible in his coat and hat.

The Brooklynite had noticed one thing peculiar. He had seen corpulent men before, but never one who had such a solid waist.

When he accidentally touched his neighbor, it was like a collision with a board. His eyes wandered to that point. It was one of the knobs noticed near the traveler's waistband by the gateman.

"Guess he's got his dinner-can in there," thought the second traveler, sleepily.

Then he caught an odor which was unmistakably that of kerosene. Where did it come from? Unless he was greatly deceived, it was from his neighbor. He moved away a little, and then arose and sat down on the opposite side of the car.

The stranger remained indifferent. With nothing but nose and beard visible, as far as his face went, he appeared to sink further and further into his coat. From the new point of view the second traveler made a new discovery. He, too, thought that waist peculiar. There was a decided lump on each side, and the clothing around it seemed to be loose.

"Queer fellow!" meditated the business man. "His hands and feet are not large, nor is he broad-shouldered. He is all waist. Wonder if it is real, or false? He smells of oil, and may be a kerosene-barrel with legs and a head. Why does he hide his face so? Is he in an ugly mood, or is he a criminal seeking to avoid detection?"

Just then the train reached the Brooklyn terminus, and the several passengers passed out.

The business man went through Sands street toward Fulton; the stranger went in the opposite direction. They saw each other no more that night.

A policeman who was patrolling his beat, a little later, observed two men standing near the corner of Sands and Jay streets. One held an umbrella, but it was mostly over himself, and his companion had pretty near the full benefit of the falling rain.

"The latter, however, had a felt hat jammed down over his eyes, and a coat buttoned closely around a figure remarkable for its development in the vicinity of the waist-band. Thus pro-

tected with hat and coat, he did not heed the rain.

They were talking earnestly, but, as the patrolman came up, they separated. One went up Jay street; the other down. Reaching the corner, the blue-coat observed a third man standing in a doorway, but, as the rain was so unpleasant, gave the matter hardly a thought.

He went on his way, but had gone only a few rods when footsteps sounded in quick succession behind him. He turned and saw the person who had been in the doorway.

"Wait a bit, officer!" that man requested. "Did you take notice of the two parties who were on the street a few moments ago?"

"I saw two men," the patrolman returned.

"What did you make of them?"

"I did not see them plainly. Why?"

"I am afraid they mean mischief."

"Why so?"

"Because one gave the other a key so that he could enter some house secretly, and told him to look out for the cans."

"I don't understand."

"Nor I."

"Repeat what you heard."

"I didn't hear all, for I wasn't close enough, but the one with the umbrella gave the other a key, and told him that he could enter the house with that, but that he must use great care and not be seen by hostile eyes. The big man said he was 'too old a bird to be caught,' and took the key. Then the other asked: 'Have you got the cans and other things?' The fat man said he had. 'Well,' said Number One, 'handle them carefully, or there will be an explosion!' That's all I heard; and, as you came up, they separated and made off."

"Hum!" mused the patrolman. "What do you make of this?"

"I'm afraid they mean mischief."

"Why didn't you tell me at once?"

"My suspicions were not aroused at first, and I hated to appear foolish."

"The fat man was to be careful of the cans, or there would be an explosion, eh?"

"Yes."

"Cans of what? Powder?"

"Possibly—or combustible oil."

"Did you see any cans?"

"No. They didn't have any, unless the fat man had them under his coat."

The officer again meditated.

"I guess there is nothing wrong," he then observed, "and, in any case, it is too late to follow them. What is your name, by the way?"

The name was given, and an address added, and then they separated. The citizen had done his duty, and did not feel disposed to linger in the rain. He made a fresh start for home, while the patrolman continued his lonely tramp from which no weather could excuse him.

Somewhat later, a boat was crossing the East River. Two honest, but ignorant, men had been to New York with certain articles and were returning. One of the twain used the oars, while the other held a lantern in one hand and wrapped his coat closer to his neck with the other.

They approached the head of a pier, where the fixed lights made a pleasant contrast to the darkness of mid-stream. The oarsman found a swift current to contend with, and had time for nothing more, but his companion was not so situated; he could use his eyes freely.

"A mighty foine night to be out!" grumbled the rower. "Whin Oi get in by me fire you won't foind me grumblin' a bit. It's no fule ave a job to handle the blades whin the wather runs so rough."

"That's nobody else out, I do b'lieve," agreed his companion. "No sane man would cross the river ef he could help it. However, our business is done—*Thunderation Moses!*"

This original exclamation was abruptly uttered, as the speaker's former sentence was left unfinished, and the expression on his face surprised the oarsman. It was one of wonder and bewilderment, and he was gazing away blankly.

"That's up?" asked the other.

"Look there!"

The last injunction was not necessary. The oarsman had turned his head, and, as he did so, he forgot to use the blades and the boat began to drift. If it had been going over a precipice, it is not likely that he would have checked it.

He was dumfounded by what met his gaze.

He saw a man, but not upon the pier. The man was on the river, but not in a boat!

He was walking on the water!

Yes; in a way as calm and matter-of-fact as though he were treading Broadway, the unknown was walking away from the pier toward the center of the great river. In a general way he was plainly visible—head, body and limbs, and he could be seen to lift his feet. The light of the pier-lamp was full upon him, and there could be no optical illusion—it was a living man, walking upon the water as though the rippling surface were a firm pavement.

"Howly Pater!" gasped the boatman, in terror.

His companion was equally amazed, but less alarmed. He did not think that he saw a supernatural being, but was struck dumb by a spec-

tacle new to him, and to most men of the Nineteenth Century.

Elevating his lantern to get additional light, he improved the chance of looking to the utmost. Not so the stranger. He looked constantly to the front, and gave no evidence that he knew any one else was near. Straight ahead he pressed, lifting his feet regularly, and as regularly receding from the pier.

"It's the devil!" gasped the oarsman.

"Hullo, thar!" suddenly hailed the man with the lantern, but the call produced no visible effect.

Still walking on the water, the mysterious stranger calmly receded from the startled boatman.

The hail, however, had served to break the spell which was upon the oarsman. He suddenly began work again, and the blades bent beneath his terrible efforts as he made for a landing-place.

"Pursue him! pursue him!" cried the man with the lantern.

"Divil a bit! Oi'm bound fur dhry land!"

"But I want ter see what sort o' a critter that is who kin walk on the water."

"Go abi'd ef ye want to, but ye'll hev ter do loike him—walk! Oi'm bound fur shore!"

The frightened speaker meant what he said, and it was some time before he could be induced to turn about. They lingered by the pier in heated argument for some time, but the oarsman finally grew somewhat ashamed and turned back.

By that time the water-walker had disappeared entirely, but they knew the direction he had taken, and the pursuit was made in quick time. They raced across to the New York side, but saw nothing of any human being, in or upon the river. Then they turned again, and made a spurt up-stream, and another spurt down-stream, but all in vain.

The water-walker had disappeared.

"Zeb Oakes, we've seen dhe Ould Nick, himself!" solemnly deposed the oarsman.

"Bah! you're afraid, Tim O'Day!"

"Afraid, is it? Begorra! you just step ashore an' Oi'll show yez whither Oi'm afraid! Oi'll putt on dhe gloves wid you anny toime ye say—"

"Come off! Nobody says you're afeerd o' me, or any common man, but you don't understand that chap."

"Do you, Zeb Oakes?"

"No, by thunder! He come out from between the two piers when I first seen him, an' he sartainly did walk right on top o' the water as me or you would on dry land."

"Howly Pater! it was the Ould Boy, in person!"

"I'm blamed ef I kin understand it! A man walk on the water! Why, ef anybody had tol' me that, I'd say he was drunk or crazy."

"Well, begorra, we seen *this* thing, ourselves."

"We did, Tim!"

"Phat was it?"

"You say."

"Oi said it was dhe Ould Nick."

"I ain't sure but you're right, Tim," soberly replied Oakes. "I guess we had better git ashore. I don't know as I keer ter stay out!"

Tim breathed a sigh of relief, dipped the oars in earnest and sent the boat rapidly toward the Brooklyn shore. They saw no more of the river mystery.

CHAPTER II.

A CRIME TO UNEARTH.

JACOB BRADSTREET, professional detective, had just finished dressing when there was a knock at his chamber-door. He opened it and saw a servant.

"There's a gentleman down-stairs to see you, sir," she announced, as she handed him a card.

He took it and read the name—Eli C. Doyle.

"Tell him I will be down at once," the detective answered.

He then turned back into his room.

"Who is it?" asked Mrs. Bradstreet.

"An agent of the Royal Safety Insurance Company. You will remember, that I did some work for them several months ago. Possibly they have another case for me."

"Another house destroyed by fire-bugs, I suppose."

"Suspected to be so destroyed," amended Bradstreet. "Insurance companies are rather too quick to suspect evil when the payment of heavy loss stares them in the face. I will see this agent, at once, and then try to join you at breakfast."

And then he went down to see Eli C. Doyle.

Mr. Bradstreet was one of the best detectives known to Brooklyn or New York fame. He had always been an independent, and under no man's orders, but his marked success brought him all the work he could attend to. It aroused some jealousy, too, and he had often made enemies among the "regulars" by beating them out. He was a man of thirty-five years, married, the father of two boys, and an excellent citizen. His substantial qualities and success had won for him the sobriquet of "Steady Hand, the Napoleon of Detectives."

Reaching the parlor, he found the early

caller awaiting him. Greetings were exchanged, and then Doyle spoke abruptly:

"Have you heard the news, Jake?"

"No."

"There was a fire last night!"

"Ah!"

"The Royal Company had insurance on it."

"Just so."

"And we think the blaze incendiary."

"That's bad," observed Bradstreet, speaking as gravely as though his opinion of insurance companies was not a trifle skeptical.

"A dwelling-house on Concord street was burned to the ground, and everything in it, including its owner."

"Indeed! There was a life lost, then?" questioned the detective, with fresh interest.

"Old Josiah Winchester was buried up!"

Bradstreet began to be fully interested. If the fire had been of incendiary origin, and a life had been lost, it was a case that caught to interest every honest man. There was, in his opinion, no bigger scoundrel, or more despicable wretch, than he who sets fire to a house at night with reckless disregard of human life.

"And you think there was a fire-bug?"

"We do, and your services are desired in the case. Our best men are all busy, and the success which attended your former connection with our business has led us to seek you again. Will you take the job?"

"We will see. Let me hear the case in detail."

"I will. For four years we have had an insurance on the Concord street house, owned by the aforesaid Josiah Winchester. He was rich, eccentric, somewhat of a hermit, and reputed penurious, but we always found him one of the best of policy-holders. Last night, as I said before, the house was burned down. His two servants escaped, but it is supposed that he perished in the flames, and that his body is even now in the ruins. He was not seen to come out, and has not been seen or heard from since."

"Where is the evidence of incendiarism?"

"At daybreak one of the agents of the Royal Company found two bright, nearly new cans in the back-yard. They smelled strongly of kerosene. They were shown to the servants, Jonathan Miles and his wife, Abigail, and they declared that the cans had not belonged to the house. The neighbors deny knowledge of them. The fire was discovered by outside parties, and those who came first made the discovery, on opening the blinds of the parlor windows, that one pane of glass had been broken, and that the window was not fastened."

"Had it been left fastened?" Bradstreet asked.

"The servants say that Mr. Winchester always saw to the windows himself, and was very particular about them. They say that if he failed to make sure that it was secure when he retired last night—it was supposed to be fastened at all times—the fact would be surprising."

"And they do not know of a pane being broken?"

"They do not. Add to this the statement that the building burned very rapidly, and you will see the theory of our insurance company. We maintain that the house was unlawfully entered by men who brought with them two cans of kerosene oil, and scattered it on the beds, carpets, and so forth, to make the flames spread rapidly."

The agent paused, and looked anxiously at Bradstreet. Would he accept or deny the theory of the insurance company? The detective, like a wise man, was not in haste to do either.

"If this supposition is correct," he quietly replied, "have you any idea who did the job?"

"No."

"What about the motive?" the Detective Napoleon asked.

"The natural theory is that the original motive was merely burglary."

"Then why was the house fired?"

"Possibly Josiah Winchester awoke; possibly he recognized them. That may have led to his being murdered, and then the house was fired to conceal the greater crime. This is only a theory—that of non-professional men, given off-hand, and we don't want to influence you."

"I see," Steady Hand observed.

"Do you believe in our idea of the house being fired?"

"I will not hazard an opinion until I have looked further, but you certainly do right in making an investigation. I will willingly look into the matter, if you wish, and, if I find your ideas confirmed, put myself at your disposal."

"That is just what we want," Doyle returned, with an air of satisfaction.

"You have spoken of Winchester and his two servants. Were they the only occupants of the house?"

"Yes."

"What relatives had Winchester?"

"The servants say that he had a brother, Alden, in New York, but that the latter rarely came there. They do not know of other relatives."

"How old was Winchester?"

"About sixty-two."

"I have not had breakfast. I will eat at once, and then move in the matter. With the exception of the cans, we can hardly expect any clues. With the house burned down, and the whole vicinity gone over by firemen, we should have nothing in that line if the pavement was soft soil and Daniel Boone, himself, stood at hand to take up the trail."

"You are right—very right," agreed Doyle, shaking his head. "It is likely to be a blind case. Well, I'll leave you alone now, and be at the ruins when you arrive. The firemen have drowned out the living coals, and the rubbish is being removed. If there is a body there, it must soon be recovered."

The men arose, and the insurance agent went away. Jacob Bradstreet adjourned to the dining-room and ate heartily with his family.

He was somewhat above the medium height, and very compactly and strongly built. His face was one of power, and he would have been an object of interest to any one who gave him close attention. He had the steady, analytical gaze of a physician, but an additional air which indicated that he would not be content with a life which doomed him to examine the tongue and feel the pulse of suffering mankind. He was, in fact, cool, bold and daring, but no one was more devoted to his family than the quiet, sagacious detective.

Breakfast did not occupy him many minutes. When it was finished he went to the scene of the fire. As Doyle had said, the house was a complete ruin, roof and walls having alike fallen in. Laborers were at work, but no new discoveries had been made.

The supposition that Josiah Winchester had perished, however, received confirmation with each passing moment.

Doyle and Miles, the servant, were there. The latter was questioned by Bradstreet.

"My wife and I were woke up by the ringing of the bell," Miles explained, "for we never had an idea of trouble until outsiders gave the alarm. The house was full of smoke, and the fire driving pell-mell all around us; and we barely got out with our lives."

"You did not go to Mr. Winchester's room?"

"No, indeed! There was a solid wall of fire between us and him."

"Did you hear him?" Steady Hand asked.

"No."

"And you think he perished?"

"He must have."

"Did you hear any unusual sounds during the night, previous to the alarm?"

"No, sir."

"You think that the parlor window was fastened, and the pane of glass unbroken, when you retired?"

"Neither I nor my wife looked, but Mr. Winchester was always very particular about having windows kept fastened, and he always made the rounds, and saw to it himself, before he turned in. Yes; I feel sure that all was secure."

"What was in the house in the way of valuables?"

"I doubt if anything was there. Certainly, there was no jewelry or silver plate, and it was always my belief that Mr. Winchester never had money there beyond a few dollars. He paid all bills in checks, unless they were very small, indeed."

"Nothing to tempt a burglar, then, if he had known the place he was getting into?" the Detective Napoleon asked.

"Nothing."

Just then a gray-uniformed postman made his appearance. He paused near Miles, whom he knew.

"I've got a letter for Mr. Winchester," he announced, "but the writer little knew the circumstances under which it would be brought to its destination."

"That's a fact!" Miles agreed, with a sigh.

"What am I to do with the letter anyhow?"

"I'll take it, and if—"

"I understand. Well, I guess it won't be irregular to deliver it to you. Of course you will give it to the proper parties, if—"

The postman finished in the same significant way that Miles had done, and glanced toward the ruins.

"I understand," said the servant, unconsciously repeating the other's words. "Yes; I'll take it, and take proper care of it."

The letter was handed over, and the Government employee went his way. Bradstreet looked at the letter curiously. At that time, all things had interest.

"Where is it postmarked?" he asked.

"Right here in Brooklyn. Why, it's nearly open, too."

He held the envelope so that the partially disarranged flap was visible, and then thrust one finger into the gap. The motion was enough to wholly open the letter.

"Now that you have gone thus far," quietly observed the detective, "you had better complete the job and see from whom it came. It may be of interest."

"That's a fact."

Miles was not in a mood to study up postal laws or to remember that, legally, he had no

right to peruse another's letter. He promptly removed the single half-sheet which was inside, and Bradstreet, looking over his shoulder, read as follows:

"JOSIAH WINCHESTER:—The writer hereby announces that he is on the secret you have so long hid at Flushing and unless paid to keep silent, he will promptly make it public. I dare say you would not want your reputation blackened, and, even if you were indifferent to that misfortune, you would not want to give up your property to parties you have forever cast off. I am a man easy to satisfy, but I need a loan, and must have it. Meet me at seven o'clock Tuesday evening, at the corner of Clinton and Pierpont streets, and we can talk it over amicably. Otherwise, I shall make your secret public without delay, or sell it to them!"

There was no signature, and while the detective was puzzling over it, Miles turned an even more perplexed face toward him.

CHAPTER III.

WHAT ABOUT THE THREATENING LETTER?

"WELL, what do you make of it?" Bradstreet asked.

"Make of it?" echoed the servant; "I don't make anything of it."

"Don't you know the writer?"

"No, sir."

"Nor what he refers to?"

"I haven't an idea. Wait!—it's probably a joke."

"Was Winchester a man with whom others would naturally joke?" inquired Steady Hand.

"Certainly not, but this may have been done through spite, you know."

"And you don't know the nature of the secret to which the letter alludes?"

"No."

"How long have you been in Winchester's service?"

"Two years."

"Very likely, as you say, this letter is a joke, but it will be prudent to keep it. At such a time as this nothing must be thrown around in a reckless way. While we hope that Mr. Winchester may, himself, have the good fortune to peruse this, the chances are against it. Will you allow me to keep it for a while?"

"Of course."

"Moreover, I wish you to promise sacredly not to mention the discovery to any one, or to refer to the reception of the letter. Will you do so?"

Miles had been told that the tall, impressive-looking gentleman was a detective, and he was not slow to give the desired pledge. He did not regard the letter as being of value, but if somebody else did, all well and good; he was willing to have everything sifted to the bottom.

"I believe that Mr. Winchester's brother has been sent for?" added the detective.

"He has, sir."

"Isn't he slow about coming?"

"He lives well up-town, in New York."

"He will probably get along soon."

Doyle, being a zealous man, had been closely watching the workmen, and giving suggestions, and he had not seen this little side-scene. Bradstreet had no idea of telling him then; certainly, not until it was shown that Josiah Winchester was dead. The detective was not the man to parade another's secrets unnecessarily, and, despite Miles's confident assertion, he was not sure but that Winchester had possessed a secret.

If Miles was confident, the letter was equally confident in its general tone.

Just then a well-dressed man of about fifty-five years approached with quick, nervous steps, and Miles no sooner saw him than he exclaimed:

"Here is Mr. Alden Winchester!"

The brother had come, at last. He looked pale and perturbed, and shivered when he glanced at the ruins and the working men.

"Good-morning, sir!" greeted Miles, in a subdued voice.

"Is there any news?" Winchester abruptly asked.

"No, sir."

"My brother has not been seen?"

"He has not, sir."

"Do they think—"

A glance toward the ruins completed the sentence sufficiently and eloquently.

"We're afraid that he perished in the flames, and they are hunting now."

The new-comer wiped the perspiration from his forehead nervously.

"This is terrible!" he exclaimed.

"You have my sympathy, sir."

Bradstreet had been observing Alden Winchester with the closeness which long experience had made a habit in his profession. Whatever the elder brother may have been, the younger was not ill looking, nor did he have the appearance of one who set money above all other things. He was a tall, slender man, with a refined, rather aristocratic look. His hair was neatly trimmed, and his grayish side-whiskers cut in good taste. His clothing was expensive, without the least trace of vulgar show, and any one would have marked him down as a man who moved in good society.

"I am afraid, sir," the Detective Napoleon observed, "that there is no hope for your brother."

"It is a terrible way to end one's life."
 "Decidedly so. May I ask what relatives he had besides yourself?"
 "We once had a sister, but she died unmarried, some years ago. Josiah and I were the only other children."
 "He was not married, I am told."
 "He was not."
 "What motive could have led to this deed?"
 "My informant said that it was the work of a burglar."

"Had your brother any enemies?"
 Winchester turned a questioning, half-startled gaze upon the questioner.

"Surely, you don't think he was murdered!" was the abrupt exclamation.

"We have no means of knowing, at present. All things are possible, though I do not say that my vague words indicate a probability. You ought to know, better than any one else, whether he had enemies."

"I do not know of any. I am not so very well informed as to his private life, but he was almost a hermit, and not a quarrelsome man. I think we may safely say that there was no one who would wish to do him harm."

"No doubt," Steady Hand readily agreed. "Burglars are getting bold and desperate, and human life counts for but little in their hands. By the way, Mr. Winchester, would it not be well for you to adjourn to some more retired place? If your brother has really perished, your nerves may be severely tried if you remain here."

Winchester readily agreed to this suggestion. Sight of the ruins filled him with horror, and though he had felt that his proper place was there, he was not slow to fall in with the idea advanced. Accompanied by the detective, he left the scene after giving directions to Miles, and Bradstreet led him to a quiet, respectable saloon.

The detective was not satisfied to be idle. The mysterious letter was in his pocket, with its hints of secrets and guilt. Until he knew that Josiah Winchester was dead he would not allow any one to see it. If, by any strange chance, the old gentleman was alive, his secret, if he had one, should be preserved. At the same time, the detective did not like to let time go to waste.

"When were you in Brooklyn last?" he inquired, after they had taken seats.

"A week ago."

"And you have not seen your brother since?"

"I have not."

"He must have led a lonely life."

"He did; but he found company in books."

"You are married, I suppose?"

"Yes; and have three children."

"Strange that your bother never married!"

"Why so? Are there no other bachelors?"

Winchester spoke quickly and peevishly, as though he resented the last remark, and the detective governed himself accordingly. Whether his companion was well informed as to his brother's past life, or not, he was not, it would seem, a man to be suspected or offended. Bradstreet was tempted to reveal the fact that he was a detective, but decided to wait for news from the ruins.

The delay was not great.

Half an hour later a man entered the saloon whom Bradstreet at once recognized, and the sight showed him that if any great case was to follow, he would have one of the regular force to work against. The man was Truman Nettle, a detective well known to him. There was no good will between them. On several occasions Bradstreet had beaten the "regular," partly by his own good work, and partly because Nettle's jealousy and hatred always led him to have a different theory from his rivals.

This person now advanced, nodded coldly to Jacob, and then addressed the New Yorker.

"Is this Mr. Winchester?" he asked.

"That's my name."

"I am come from the ruins—you can guess with what news. Your brother's body has been recovered!"

Winchester covered his eyes.

"Poor Josiah!" he murmured, brokenly.

"Also," added Nettle, "you are requested to visit Police Headquarters for a private interview."

As he spoke he gave Bradstreet a triumphant look which seemed to say, "I am going to take this man away from you and your influence!"

Bradstreet rallied. Thus far there was no absolute proof that Josiah Winchester had been the victim of any one but a burglar, or that a murderous blow had done its work before the flames; but he did not like to have Nettle think that he was scoring a victory.

"This gentleman should have time to attend to the deceased, first of all," he gravely observed.

"Mr. Winchester," piped Nettle, glibly, "do you know who this man is?"

"No, but—"

"He is a private detective, and has fastened himself upon you with a purpose!"

A trace of annoyance became visible in the New Yorker's manner, but he readily responded:

"What of it? It is nothing to me what he is."

"Mr. Nettle," calmly remarked Bradstreet, "has a marked faculty for rushing to conclusions so fast as to fall down over his own feet. If you think I am an enemy, sir, I will see you later and convince you otherwise."

"Excuse me, but I have no such idea. Pray don't mention it, sir."

His reply had been equal to Jacob's in courtesy, but the shadow of annoyance remained. No one likes to learn that he has been questioned by a detective without knowing it, no matter how innocent he is. Nettle's untimely coming had put Bradstreet in a false position, but he felt able to remove all unfavorable impressions, later.

In any case, he would make a great mistake to object to Winchester's going to answer the police request.

He kept his seat after the men went out, and was talking with the proprietor when a man came in for a glass of beer.

"Say, Weber, that was a murder over on Concord street!" he exclaimed.

"How was dot?" the proprietor asked.

"They've found Josiah Winchester's body, and the blade of a knife was in it. The handle was all burned away."

Weber held up both hands.

"Goot heavens! Den it was murder!"

"Certain, it was. You'll hear the papers howling it forth from the lungs of street-boys before long."

The speaker went out, and Weber shook his head and turned to the Detective Napoleon again.

"Dot was terrible. I vonder where Winchester's wife was, and if she escaped?"

"Winchester was not married," Jacob replied.

"Hey? Vot's dot?"

"He was a bachelor."

"Guess you didn't know him?"

"No. Did you?"

"Not to speak mit him, but I know he was a married man. Who told you he was not? I've heard my wife dell all about it, and dot was so."

"Do you really mean to say that Josiah Winchester was married?" the detective asked, with increasing interest.

"Dot's shoost v'at I mean to say. He was married, and my wife was a witness to der ceremony!"

CHAPTER IV.

WAS WINCHESTER MARRIED?

JACOB BRADSTREET was growing decidedly interested, though he could not understand why, if Winchester had been married, the saloon-keeper knew of the fact and others did not. It appeared to be a mistake, but he was not the man to let any circumstance go uninvestigated.

"When was he married?" the detective continued.

"Oh! it was over twenty years ago," Weber replied.

"Impossible!"

"Don't I know?" was the retort. "Dot was before I was married, and my wife was working around where she could. You dime she gets a job to help clean a church, und, shoost as she was going away, in come a young woman mit Josiah Winchester, und they gets married. My wife knowed him by sight. She stood well back, for she had on her old clothes, but did you effer know a woman to run away from a wedding? I guess not, und she didn't run away. She stayed mit herself well back, und seen it all."

"How did she know it was Winchester?"

"She had shoost done some work at his house."

"Did he see her?"

"No."

"Do you know that Josiah Winchester claimed to be a bachelor, and his friends never heard of any marriage?"

Weber's face fell.

"Vas dot so?"

"Certainly. Have you never heard it said that he was a single man?"

"No. I haf never heard any von speak of him but my wife. She pointed him out von day, as he was passing, und told me who he was. Sometimes I haf seen him since, but I never spoke mit him, und did not know any of his friends."

"Where is your wife?"

"She died von year ago."

"Who was the minister who performed the ceremony?"

Weber did not know, but he gave the location of the church, which had been well in the suburbs of the Brooklyn of twenty years before.

Steady Hand asked some other questions, but the German had told all that he knew. The detective thought of the letter in his pocket, and wondered if there was anything in Weber's story. Had Josiah Winchester died at the hands of a burglar whom he detected at his work, or was there something back of it? In any case, the investigator's hands were full.

He must see Alden Winchester and request permission to retain the letter; he must investigate the rumor of a marriage; and must be at the corner of Clinton and Pierrepont streets to meet the unknown—though it was likely that

the latter would hear of the tragedy, and keep away from the place of appointment.

Weber was a good friend, in a humble way, of the detective, and when requested not to tell any one else about the marriage, he promised readily.

Then Bradstreet left the saloon.

An hour later there was quite a crowd assembled at the ruins of the Concord street house. News of the tragedy had spread, and curiosity had drawn the usual crowd in such cases. Among those who had gathered were two young men who had not long since passed their twenty-first birthdays. They stood near each other, discussing the points of the case.

"I heard Nettle, the detective, say that it was undoubtedly the work of burglars," observed one of the pair.

"I wouldn't give much for his opinion," returned the other, with perceptible scorn.

"Have you another theory, Dudley?"

"I? No; but I don't believe in Nettle."

"It is odd that a house can burn down only a few blocks from us, and we be none the wiser."

"That's because we go to bed to sleep, James," was the practical reply.

"So did Winchester."

"Poor fellow! he had a tragic awakening."

"In the midst o' life we are inter death," croaked a lugubrious voice near them.

They turned and saw a seedy old man. He too seemed to have been attracted by curiosity; but while they were neatly dressed, he was both dilapidated and unclean. He wagged a gray beard in a patriarchal way, and added:

"No man knoweth what a night may bring forth inter view so it may be seen."

"Strange things do come and go," agreed he who had been called Dudley.

"The road o' life is full o' race-hosses an' snails; beggars an' princes; saints an' sinners, but all bring up at the same goal ef they stick ter the road."

"You are a philosopher, I see."

"I hev ter be. Men in trade hev ter meet crosses, burdens, loads an' 'flections. Be you in trade?"

"Somewhat."

"So be I, an' I would like ter call yer attention to the fack. I hev here, gents, a vallyble encyclopedia o' useful facks an' generalities. This book"—he had unwound a tattered, soiled newspaper, and exhibited a book which appeared to have seen hard service—"this book is a manual o' useful things fur the farmer—"

"We are not farmers."

"Ef you was you wouldn't need it. Doctors don't need patent medicines, an' farmers don't need books on agriculture. It is city fellers that don't know turnips from watermelons that I aim ter effeck. All men should hev knowledge o' agriculture, an' you ain't no exceptions."

"Can you be a philosopher and a book-agent at the same time?"

"Ef I wa'n't the first I couldn't be the second. It takes a good 'eal o' philosophy ter be kicked down-stairs, an' not feel hurt in body an' mind. Fur that reason I prefer ter sell in the street, where I can't fall so fur."

"Sorry we can't buy."

"But you ain't heard what I've got. This book is Pillsberry's Manual o' Rural Science. It teaches when ter plow, when ter reap, when ter work an' when ter play. It shows how ter sow pertaters an' dig corn. Tells the best season ter plant cigars, so as ter git a good yield in the fall. Tells how onions kin be cultivated so that they won't smell rank ter heaven or anybody's nostrils. Tells how ter keep crows from pullin' up cabbages, an' how ter make traps ter ketch owls that roam around ter kerry off lambs, as they sport on the fields in the beautiful sun."

"Have you ever read your book?"

"No; but I git bushels o' letters from them who hev."

"Then they are still alive?"

"Young man," was the reproachful reply, "you should not speak ill o' the noble art of agriculture. What would you eat ef it wa'n't fur farmers?"

"Pretzels!" suggested James.

"My friend, what are pretzels made of?"

"Nobody has ever discovered."

"More levity, but we'll let it pass. I guess you've seen me afore."

"Can't say I have."

"I'm Old Cy Crookback, sometimes called Clover Crookback."

He touched a bit of green near a button-hole. At first sight it might have puzzled a city dweller, but it was a stalk of clover, as fresh as though right from the rural districts of which Old Cy had spoken.

He was a queer-looking old man. His bushy gray hair and beard did not seem to have received attention in many weeks, and his threadbare clothes were liberally pasted over with dirt of all kinds from the insidious dust to the bold and defiant smear. The most noticeable thing about him, however, was a hump between his shoulders which at once accounted for the name he had given. His back was crooked, and the hump was not pleasant to look at. It was large,

and looked likely to be inconvenient, but he always managed to get around with celerity. If any one had been told that he was a beggar with a mournful story on his tongue's end the statement would have been believed readily, but he was never known to beg.

Just as he had announced his identity some one remarked that the police were looking for witnesses, and had several collected already. Clover Crookback at once ceased praising his book, and when Dudley Leland and James Blake, the two young men lately introduced, looked for him again, he was gone.

A few minutes later he made his appearance at the shop of an undertaker to which the remains of the deceased had been removed. The police were in possession of the fatal knife, but it was of no value. The fire had dealt as severely with that as with the victim. The wooden part of the weapon was all burned away, and the blade so fire-eaten that the name of the maker could not be told.

When Old Cy Crookback entered, Truman Nettle, the detective, was having things all his own way. He had brought Alden Winchester to identify the remains, as a matter of form, but the fire had done its work too well. Alden had turned his back and stood gloomily by the window, while Nettle talked freely and made himself prominent by posing as a great man.

Close after Clover Crookback came another man, who at once engaged Nettle's attention. "I have come from Policeman Beltney," he announced.

"Ah! you are the man who saw something strange, last night, at the corner of Sands and Jay streets?"

"I am."

"What is your name?"

"Lemuel Barnes."

"What about the men at the corner?"

"Well, sir, I was overtaken by the rain and stepped into a deep doorway, as it momentarily increased, hoping that it would let up. Two men came along and paused near me—"

"What sort of men?"

"One was rather tall and slender, and gentlemanly looking, but the other was very fat, wore rough clothes, and had a soft hat jammed down over his eyes."

"What did they say?"

"I heard only a little. I thought it queer they should stop in the rain and talk, so I looked at them curiously. Pretty soon the tall man gave the fat one a key, and told him that he could enter the house with that, but he must be careful and not be seen or get caught."

"Aha!" cried Nettle. "This is of interest. Proceed."

"The fat man said that he was too old a bird to be caught. Then the tall man asked: 'Have you got the cans?' The big fellow said he had. 'Well,' continued the tall man, 'handle them carefully, or there will be an explosion.'"

"Ha!" cried Nettle. "He was to handle the cans carefully, or there would be an explosion! Mark that, and remember that, from the rapidity with which the flames spread in Winchester's doomed house, it is suspected that the guilty parties poured kerosene, which they brought there in cans, over combustible articles! Now, where did the tall man get his key?"

"I don't know."

"Was it new?"

"That I can't say."

"I wish you could. If it was new, he may have had it made; if it was old, he must have been in the house before and stolen it. Did you suspect that the cans mentioned by them contained kerosene?"

"The patrolman suggested that it was powder, and I answered—'Yes, or combustible oil.'"

"You thought the fat man had these cans under his coat, didn't you?"

"I suggested to the patrolman that such a thing was possible."

"Did you smell kerosene?"

"No. That would be impossible, anyhow, in the storm."

"Mr. Winchester, please come here."

For the first time the latter gentleman turned away from the window. Barnes's gaze, seeking to discover which was Winchester, rested upon him. Then a look of surprise and recognition flashed over the witness's face, and he quickly pointed to Winchester and excitedly exclaimed: "By heavens! that's the man who gave the big fellow the key!"

CHAPTER V.

A STRANGE ACCUSATION.

SILENCE followed this unexpected declaration, even Truman Nettle being for awhile deprived of his loquacity. Barnes kept his finger pointed at Winchester, and the pause was as dramatic, but the latter was the calmest man present, as far as outward appearances went.

"My good man, you are crazy!" he pleasantly answered, after a brief pause.

"Certainly he is," Nettle agreed. "Witness, that is Mr. Winchester."

"Winchester?" Barnes echoed.

"Yes; brother of the deceased. You are very much mistaken, you see."

"I don't care if he is a dozen times his brother," replied Barnes, recovering himself, and speaking doggedly; "he's the person who gave the fat man the key!"

"Mr. Winchester," said Nettle, "did you not tell me that you were in New York, last night?"

"I did."

"That settles it, and you are wrong, Barnes."

"Who saw the scene at the corner of Sands and Jay streets—you or I?"

"If I had seen them, I should not have made such a big blunder."

"Your blunder comes in now!" retorted Barnes. "I know what I am talking about, and am not to be bluffed out of it. I could not swear to the identity of the big fellow if I had him right under my nose, for his hat was a good enough disguise to baffle casual notice, but the other one—he who told him to be careful of the cans or there would be an explosion, and who gave him a key so that he could enter 'the house'—whatever house he meant—that man I did get a look at. I'm ready to swear that's him!"

And he again pointed to Alden Winchester.

The latter was beginning to look uncomfortable. He knew that Nettle had marked down the men seen at the corner of Sands and Jay streets as open to strong suspicion, if they were not the actual criminals. No man, let him be ever so innocent, likes to hear himself connected with an accusation of such a nature. Innocent or guilty, it was not strange that Alden Winchester began to show uneasiness.

"But I tell you I was in New York," he persisted.

"I don't care what you tell me."

"Don't you know he's the dead man's brother?" demanded Nettle.

"Well, he's his heir, too, ain't he?" was the retort.

"Scoundrel! I am tempted to chastise you!" Winchester cried. "Do you suppose I would do harm to my own brother? I am not made of such material as the men you must be in the habit of associating with."

Nettle was annoyed. He had wanted to make much out of Barnes's story, and get the reputation of quickly solving a mystery, but he felt himself in deep and troubled waters.

"Be calm, Mr. Winchester!" he urged. "Nobody believes you guilty, and it is all this man's stupidity."

"See here!" cried Barnes, hotly, "if you know more about this case than I do, tell it yourself; but I won't be bullied by you or any one else!"

"We need not pursue the matter any further," remarked Nettle, with severe dignity. "I dare say that you are perfectly sincere, Barnes, but your story, as far as the identification goes, carries its refutation on the surface. We will let it drop."

"I'm willing," was the independent answer, "for I've had enough of you!"

"Now, Mr. Winchester," Nettle resumed, "we will go to the police station, to see if any witnesses have shown up."

Clover Crookback pushed forward.

"Hev I understood right that ye want a man who was 'arly enter the scene o' the fire?" he asked.

"We want all such men."

"I'm one on 'em."

"Then follow us to the station."

Nettle spoke somewhat superciliously. While he had the honor of keeping company with a well-dressed man like Alden Winchester, a vagabond of Crookback's stamp was by far too humble for him to consider with equanimity. He took particular pains to banish Cyrus to the rear when the sidewalk was reached, but the old man accepted the position without a murmur, and placidly followed.

Mr. Nettle talked steadily, but did not refer to the alleged identification by Barnes. He wished to spare his wealthy companion's feelings, and showed a lofty contempt for humble Barnes. Whatever Winchester thought of the situation, he did not again allude to the so-called mistake.

When the station was reached the captain was found at his desk, and at liberty. The New Yorker had been there already and had a full conversation, so Nettle pompously put the peddler forward at once.

"Here is a man who was early at the fire."

"Good! You see, my man, we want to talk with every person who was early on the scene. What is your name?"

"Old Cy Crookback, sometimes called Clover Crookback," croaked that gentleman.

"How's that?"

"Old Cy Crookback."

The captain looked thoughtfully at the hump between the old man's shoulders.

"You don't mean to say that your name is really Crookback?" he asked.

"That's it."

"Absurd!"

"It ain't a pooty name, an' I've sometimes thought it was that which give me the knapsack I kerry enter my back. Anyhow, it's a light an' flippant name."

"What is your business?"

"I'm a public benefactor," Cy croaked. "I

hev here"—he uncovered his greasy old book—"a notable work which should be in every family. It is a vallerble memorial o' 'taters, cabbinges, onions an' other roo s an' yarbs. I'd like ter sell ye a copy—"

"Never mind!" was the hasty response. "If you are a book-agent, let it pass at that; I know your species. Well, you were at the fire, eh?"

"I was, that."

"What did you see?"

"I seen the fire an' smoke; an' the firemen was a-rampagin' around like p'ison. One on 'em hit me a lick on the deformity Nature put atween my shoulders, an' he says, says he: 'Take that Bedloe's Island back ter the Statoo o' Liberty!' says he. I wish ter complain—"

"But you were there before the firemen?"

"Wal, I should hope so, fur they was as slow—"

"What did you see? Were any other men ahead of you?"

"Severial."

"What were they doing?"

"Ringin' the door-bell like Cain."

"Did you see the broken window?"

"The winder was slid up, an' some o' the men was inter the house."

"Did you go in?"

"Yes."

"How far did you go?"

"Not fur. Smoke an' fire was there, an' it was as hot as a fiery, blazin', belchin' furnace."

"Did you see anything suspicious? Or any men who appeared to be there for a motive not honest?"

"Can't say that I did."

"Have you any idea how the window-pane was broken, or the sash raised?"

"Not an idee."

"Then I don't see that you know much about it, anyhow."

"I don't," Cy agreed, in a very mournful manner.

"Then we have no further use for you."

"Can't I sell ye a copy o' my book on agriculture afore I go? It—"

"I have no use for it."

"But ev'ry man, woman an' infant ought ter hev' it. As a memorial o' useful facks it has no eku'l. It tells all about shearin' sheep with electricity; shows how ter prevent terbarker comin' up cabbages; an' has a recipe fur destroyin' 'tater-bugs with dynamite—"

"I don't want it. Whom have we here?" he added, as a rough, weather-beaten old fellow entered.

"Me name is Tim O'Day," the new-comer announced, "an' Oi have a mystery fur you ter wrastle wid. It's meself thinks it may relate ter dhe murder."

"Well, what is it?"

"Begorra, cap'n, Oi sane dhe quarest soight on dhe river last night dhat mortal man iver seen. Oi an' me mate, Zeb Oakes, had been over to New York wid a boat-load ave dicker fur Macomby & Neal, an' on our way back, as we approached dhe Brooklyn pier, phat should we see but a mon come out fram between two piers, an' walk away on dhe wather. Yes, sor; crass dhe river by walkin' on dhe wather, as though it wor dry land."

"Mr. O'Day, what brand of liquor do you drink?"

"Devila drap hev' I drinked in tin years, sor."

"Do you mean to ask me to believe that you were sober last night, and saw what you allege?"

"What ye m'ane by 'allege' Oi don't know, but phat Oi towld yez is all Gospel truth, begorra. Zeb Oakes will swear to it, too."

"How could the man walk on the water?"

"That's phat we don't know. He had no throuble, howiver, but walked off as pert as ye plase."

"And crossed the river on the water, without a boat?"

"Crossed it walkin' as straight as Oi be now!" declared O'Day, stubbornly.

"Did you hail him?"

"We did, but devil a look did he give us."

"Why didn't you pursue him?"

"We did—whin we'd got over our scare. Fact is, sor, Oi thought it was Ould Nick himself—an' Oi say so now, though Zeb Oakes will hev it that 'twas a common mon. Yes; we chased him; but before we got started he had gone out ave soight, an' devil a glimpse ave him could we get after."

"In what way does this interest me?"

"Oi have figured it up that we seen the critter about dhe toime dhe fire broke out, an' it may have been him!"

"That's a far-fetched inference."

"D'ye think so?"

"I do."

"All right, sor; Oi'm not sayin' but you're roight, but dhe case was so strange Oi thought Oi'd tell yez."

"You did right, O'Day, and I thank you."

"You're quoute welcome, an' now Oi'll take me l'ave."

The boatman went out, and then the police captain smiled in an amused way.

"Our worthy friend ought to sign the pledge," he observed. "He will be seeing snakes next!"

CHAPTER VI.

THE DETECTIVE FINDS SNAGS IN THE WAY.

SEVEN o'clock was close at hand, and the roar and bustle of daily business was fast dying away. At the corner of Clinton and Pierrepont streets there was no more stir than was occasioned by fast-walking pedestrians. No one paused to loiter.

The latter fact forced itself strongly upon Jacob Bradstreet, who had found the best place of concealment possible, and was on the watch for the writer of the note which had commended Josiah Winchester to meet him at that point at seven.

The detective did not expect to see him.

The morning papers had announced that the old gentleman was probably dead, and if the would-be blackmailer was a man given to reading, he would see that he had moved too late; while the fact that his letter had been mailed, and would fall into other hands, would show the writer the vital necessity of keeping away from the corner.

To the best of the detective's belief, the man did keep away. Steady Hand watched until eight o'clock, and during the interval no one paused on the corner, or indicated any knowledge of an engagement. When the last named hour arrived, Bradstreet gave it up and left the place.

Knowing that Alden Winchester had put up at a hotel for the night, he went there at once. When his name was sent up he was admitted without delay. He found the New Yorker lying on the bed, looking gloomy and weary.

"I hope I don't intrude," Bradstreet observed, apologetically.

"Don't mention it. Since you are a detective, I am ready to aid you all I can, even though you represent an institution for which I have no love—an insurance company. Permit me to say that your company shall receive no injustice at my hands, or be forced to pay if they ought not to. Pray sit down and let me hear how I can aid you."

All this was very courteously said, and if Mr. Winchester remembered that Jacob had extracted several answers from him before mentioning the fact that he was a detective, he evinced no signs of resentment. Bradstreet, however, thought that he showed considerable haste in placing himself on record in the opening speech.

The reply was equally polite, however.

"Thank you, sir. As far as the insurance company is concerned, I will merely say now that it, like you, aims at no more than justice. The chief end of all concerned is to bring to justice the slayer, or slayers, of your brother."

"Mr. Nettle says they were undoubtedly burglars, and nothing more, and has them in mind, under suspicion, now. I forget the exact names."

Bradstreet bowed. Clearly, Nettle had pledged the New Yorker to silence, fearing that some one would steal his idea and beat him out in the case. On the other hand, Jacob must now reveal a part of his own theory, and he feared that Winchester would not be so ready to keep his secrets.

Despite this, he did not fear Nettle.

He came to business at once.

"Mr. Winchester, I have in my possession a letter lately written to your deceased brother. It was mailed last night, and delivered this morning. Jonathan Miles, the servant, received it when I was present. The envelope was imperfectly sealed, and, in handling it, the flap became loosened entirely. I took the liberty of reading the contents."

"I trust you were well rewarded."

The New Yorker endeavored to speak with indifference, but there was something akin to annoyance, resentment and sarcasm in his manner.

"Speaking from the standpoint of one who hopes to bring your brother's murderers to justice, I was. Please read and judge for yourself!"

The Detective Napoleon passed over the note, and Winchester began to read without delay. The handwriting seemed to convey nothing to his mind, but, presently, he lost his air of indifference. It was succeeded by a look of annoyance, and Jacob thought he had had just about time to reach the allusion to the "secret" alleged to have been "so long hid at Flushing," by Josiah Winchester.

Nevertheless, the reader did not raise his eyes until he reached the end, and there was nothing further to be seen in the way of perturbation.

He bent his gaze upon his companion unwaveringly.

"What rubbish is this?" he demanded.

"Is it rubbish?"

"What else can it be?"

"I am not acquainted with your late brother's affairs, but, to my mind, this note has the stamp of possible truth."

"In what way?"

"I can only reply that it seems to be genuine."

"It is a cruel jest."

"Then you think no secret of your brother's is hid at Flushing?"

"Emphatically, yes."

"You have said that you were not well acquainted with his private life?"

"Simply because he lived almost as a hermit. I think I knew his private affairs as well as any one could, but a man who devotes nearly all his time to his books, has no private life but that of a student."

"Then you think he had no romance?"

"A romance in his life? You cannot know his reputation. He avoided almost every one."

"But it may lie years back."

"Why do you think that?"

Winchester looked steadily at the detective as he spoke, but he had to deal with one quite as skillful as himself at disguising his thoughts.

"Romances usually lie on the bright side of thirty-five, and, as you point out, an aged student is not likely to have such things—though the rule is not without exceptions."

"Josiah was not a man to deal with romances. Ask any one who knew him, and judge by the replies."

"Then you think this letter—"

"A hoax."

"You ought to know."

"The hour mentioned here was seven. Why didn't you meet the writer?"

"I went there, but no one came."

"I thought not."

Bradstreet was done with Alden Winchester. He might have told what the German saloon-keeper had said about a marriage over twenty years before, but this he did not see fit to do. Experienced as he was in reading men and detecting evasions, he had become, like all good detectives, a dangerous man for any one who had a secret to deal with. He now decided that Winchester was keeping something back.

He had heard of Lemuel Barne's assertion that Winchester was one of the men whom he had seen at the corner of Sands and Jay streets, but was not influenced by that. Neither did he regard a lack of confidence as evidence of guilt.

He simply decided that if Winchester would not confide in him, he would not confide in Winchester, and, consequently, he kept his own secrets.

Although annoyed by the situation, he did not allow the least sign of disturbance to appear in his manner. With quiet, friendly words, he continued the conversation for some time longer, and then took his departure.

He asked for the letter, and received it without demur or hesitation on the New Yorker's part.

When outside again he set out to learn the name of the pastor of the church where, according to the German, his wife had seen the marriage ceremony so long before. It proved that the pastor lived near at hand, and Bradstreet went there at once. Inquiry developed the fact that he had been in charge of the church society but eight years, but his predecessor's term of incumbency covered the previous two decades; and that gentleman was still alive, at a good old age, and would be able to help.

This information was gained without disclosing the object of inquiry, and then the detective departed.

By that time it was too late for another call, so he went home and retired for the night.

The following morning he glanced over the newspapers while eating breakfast. They announced that, beyond doubt, Josiah Winchester had been killed by burglars; that the identity of the criminals was known; and that they would soon be under arrest.

Bradstreet perused this information with calmness. He had read such articles before, and knew just what they were worth. Evidently, Mr. Truman Nettle had been "loading" that susceptible article, a reporter just out of college.

Half an hour later the Detective Napoleon was on his way to see the retired preacher. Reaching his destination he found the reverend gentleman at home, and was soon in his presence. Somewhat to the caller's surprise, he was promptly recognized.

"I have known you by sight for some time, Mr. Bradstreet," said the clergyman. "You are a detective?"

"Perhaps, then, you can surmise why I am here?"

"Certainly not. I trust it is not to arrest me," and the old gentleman smiled pleasantly.

"Not by any means. I presume that you have read of the Winchester murder?"

"Ah! yes; I have indeed. A lamentable affair!"

"Did you know the deceased?"

"No, sir."

"I am told that you married him, however."

"Married him! Why, the paper says that he was a bachelor."

"He was supposed to be one, but I am informed otherwise. In fact as I said before, it is stated that you married him to a lady to me unknown, over a score of years ago."

"Then what has become of the wife?"

"Just what I want to know."

"I have married a large number of persons, many of whom were utter strangers to me, so

of course, I cannot say definitely. I have no recollection of marrying this Mr. Winchester, but, if I did do so, it would be remarkable if I remembered it. My books would show, however, if it was important."

"That is just why I came here. I thought that you would be likely to have such a record, and it is of great importance to me to establish the fact, one way or another."

"I will aid you to the extent of my power. I have the record of every marriage I ever performed, and we will look. Excuse me for a moment, if you please, and I will bring the books."

And he arose and left the room.

CHAPTER VII.

THE SECRET AT FLUSHING.

THE detective was not long left alone. The clergyman returned bearing several books.

"Can you give the date of the marriage?" he asked.

"My informant thought that it was about twenty-two years ago, and he was sure the month was April."

"This book covers that year, and several other years. Let us look at April!"

Finding the proper place, the search was begun. It was discovered that, during the month, he had performed eleven marriages, but the name, Winchester, did not appear. They looked further. March and May yielded no returns. Then they searched in April of the previous year, and that of the subsequent year, but the dead man's name was not there. This want of success led the persevering clergyman to go over the entire five years nearest to the date believed to be right, but failure still stared them in the face.

"Perhaps he was married under an assumed name," Steady Hand suggested. "Suppose you look at the April first investigated and see what couples were strangers to you."

This was done, and out of the eleven marriages it proved that he knew eight of the grooms. Only three were left, and, in one case, both of the contracting parties were marked down as belonging in Philadelphia.

Such a record proved nothing, however, for, if a groom had reasons for giving a false name, he would also be likely to give a fictitious residence.

But the clergyman's fingers strayed to the next record below, and remained stationary.

"Thomas Blake and Hannah Wise, both of Brooklyn," he read. "That sounds familiar to me. What circumstance has rendered it so?"

He meditated, and Bradstreet prudently left him alone. If memory brought back anything, it would come better in that way than if spurred on by suggestions from one who knew nothing.

Suddenly the old gentleman's face brightened.

"I have it!" he said. "Once, when traveling to the eastward, I stopped at the edge of a village to get a drink of water. A comely lady answered my knock when I applied at a neat little cottage, and in her I recognized this same Hannah Blake, *nee* Wise. I remember it plainly. She was not so quick with recognition as I, and was surprised when I called her by name, but expressed pleasure when she knew who I was. I remember that she said, in answer to my inquiry, that Mr. Blake was not at home; that his business called him away a good deal. There were two children— But this cannot be of interest to you. Or, is it?"

"In what place did the Blakes live?"

"Flushing!"

How vividly the single word recalled to Jacob's mind the sentence in the unknown's letter—"the secret you have so long hid at Flushing." Thus had the would-be blackmailer written to Josiah Winchester.

"When did you make this call, sir?"

"At an estimate, seventeen or eighteen years ago."

"And the children—how old were they?"

"One appeared to be three or four years old; the other was a mere infant."

"Have you ever seen or heard from them since?"

"No. I had entirely forgotten my call, anyhow, until sight of the names in this book recalled it. They passed out of my sight like hundreds of others whom I have married."

"Do you remember Blake's personal appearance?"

"No; not in the least. Surely, you do not suspect that he was Winchester?"

"It is worth investigating."

"But the paper says that Winchester was a man of irreproachable character, and a man who would marry a woman under an assumed name must have something to conceal."

"Such cases do occur."

"Not frequently, I hope."

"Let us hope not."

Bradstreet knew that, while he looked at the world as he found it, most clergymen looked at it as they wished it was: so he did not stop to argue a useless point. He only delayed to get what information he could in regard to the location in Flushing of the old Blake residence, and then left the house.

A good deal of valuable time had been consumed, but it might prove that it had been well

expended. The detective went home, remained a few minutes, and then set his face toward Flushing. Nettle, his rival, might have smiled to see him look for clues in that direction, but Bradstreet did not care a picayune for Nettle, or Nettle's way of doing business.

In due time he was in Flushing, and in the locality where the minister had described the cottage as being located. He stopped a bright-looking boy.

"Young man," he asked, "do you know anybody in this place named Thomas Blake?"

"Nop!" promptly returned Young America.

"Or anybody else named Blake?"

"Nop!"

"All right; we can't trade then."

"Trade?" repeated Young America. "Is thar bullion inter it?"

"If you think twenty-five cents will enliven your memory, without sending you outside the path of veracity, there will be that much 'bullion' for you."

"That's biz," was the composed rejoinder. "Wal, thar used fer ter be a fam'ly named Blake here—James, an' his sister Leobelle, an' their mother, an' it strikes me thar was an old gent who give 'em the dead shake an' skedaddled. They lived up yender, but went away 'bout two year ago."

"Where did they go?"

"Dunno; but it may be my maternal parient kin tell ye. See that house up thar, with one blind on the winder an' t'other on the ground?"

"Yes."

"That's my maternal parient's home-base. Call on her, an' I shouldn't be a tall s'prised ef she give ye some pints. Strikes me thar was some scandal 'bout the Blakes, an' the female sex is always posted in scandal. Ax my parent aforesaid. So-long!"

Young America sauntered away, and Bradstreet went on to the house that had the tumble-down blinds. His knock was answered by a woman rather agreeable to look upon.

"I have called, madam," he announced "to see if you can give me any information in regard to the Blake family, once resident here."

"Do you mean Hannah Blake and her children?"

"I think that is the name. The husband was named Thomas."

"If you want news of that scalawag, you'll have to inquire elsewhere!" declared the lady, elevating her nose.

"I conclude that he was not a favorite with you?"

"A favorite!—a favorite with me! Sir, I claim to be a respectable woman—"

"Pardon me, madam; I meant no harm. I know next to nothing about the family, and do not know whether they were saints or sinners."

"You are safe enough to class Thomas Blake as a sinner. He neglected as good a family as ever was, and wound up by deserting them. He had money—so everybody thought—but precious little it was that they ever saw of it. But if you want to know about them, come in!"

"Thank you; I will."

The detective entered, and was given a seat in a neat little room.

Young America had not judged his mother incorrectly. She was eager to tell what she knew about the Blakes—so eager that she did not stop to inquire who the caller was, whence he came, or why he was in search of information.

"I remember the Blakes very well when they first came here," she began, volubly. "She was a nice, quiet little woman, gentle and honest, a great reader and the best of neighbors; but not one who would set the North River on fire. I don't mean that she lacked intelligence, but that she was one of those women who bow their heads to their husbands when he says this, that or the other, and never think of having a will of their own."

"I see."

"They came here and settled over twenty years ago—about twenty-two years, I think, for the oldest child is now a man of twenty-one, if alive. We never saw much of Thomas Blake around here. For some years he was here about half of the time, but make friends—not he! He kept as close to the house as you please, and wouldn't be friendly with anybody."

"Eccentric, eh?"

"Wicked, I say; but I can't prove it. They had two children, James and Leobelle; and finer children you never saw. The father seemed to like them when they were young, but it didn't last. From the first the old man—he was at least fifteen years older than his wife—from the first he was away a good deal, as I said before, and matters went from bad to worse. He was more and more away. 'Business,' explained his wife, meekly; but I turned up my nose—I know men—I turned up my nose and said 'Bah!'"

The lady gave an illustration of how she had said it, which was rich in the extreme. Clearly, she was never created for a weak and suffering wife.

"I see," the detective gravely observed.

"Things went on in this way, and he was more and more away. James and Leobelle were not like their mother, and when they had grown up, and could realize the situation, they took up for her stoutly, and, I am told, old man

Blake was strongly reproached by them. Probably that ended the small affection he had for them, and hastened the catastrophe."

"Then there was a catastrophe?"

"Well, the old man deserted them. Wa'n't that a catastrophe? Yes, he ran away. He had been absenting himself more and more, and he finally stepped out wholly. Now, it was always my opinion that he had plenty of money, but he left them without a dollar of his money. True, he had given them nothing for some time, and James's small earnings had supported the family, but it seemed all the meaner when he went off for good, and left them without money."

"What explanation did you get of his disappearance?"

"His family said but little, but it leaked out that he sent back a letter telling them he should never come near them again—and that was the last of him!"

"He kept his threat?" inquired Steady Hand.

"He did."

"What do you think became of him?"

"That question brings up another mystery."

"What is it?"

CHAPTER VIII.

CROCKBACK WORRIES SOMEBODY.

"I DON'T believe that the man's name was Blake, anyhow!" declared the lady.

"No! What do you think it was?" the detective asked.

"Nobody knows. The neighbors long had a suspicion that Mr. Thomas Blake was sailing under false colors, and under an assumed name, and, after he left for good, it leaked out that James and Leobelle had the same theory. But they were as uncertain as we were. Who was Blake? Where did he live? Nobody knew."

"And was it not learned?"

"Nobody here ever learned; I can't say how it was with the family. Just as soon as they decided that the old man had deserted them for good, they packed up and left."

"Where did they go?"

"To Brooklyn."

"What part of Brooklyn?"

"Nobody knows. They felt the disgrace keenly, and Mrs. Blake told one of her best friends here that they intended to disappear from the view of all who knew them. I guess they've done so, for if anybody in Flushing knows where they are, or has ever heard from them, she won't confess."

"You say that James felt very hard toward his father?"

"Yes."

"Wouldn't it be natural for him to get square with the old gentleman?"

"I should try to."

"Did you ever hear of any course of satisfaction marked out by them?"

"No. They were too good and law-abiding to do any harm, and I feel sure James would scorn to lay a finger on him, in anger or otherwise, but I think they would make him support his wife."

"Describe Thomas Blake, if you please."

"He was about sixty years old when I saw him last, but was not an old-looking man. He had very dark hair, and it was streaked with white, but he was erect and strong. He was of slight build, and a good deal dried up, but his health was good. He shaved his chin, and wore mustache and side-whiskers."

This description applied very well to Josiah Winchester, as Bradstreet had heard of him.

"But," added the lady, suddenly, "I forgot to ask why you are interested."

"I thought he might be a man I had known, but I am sure my man was not named Thomas. You are sure of the name?"

"Oh! yes."

"Then I shall have to give it up."

"If you ever hear of Thomas Blake, I hope you'll let me know. And if James is in Brooklyn, won't his name be in the Directory?"

"Very likely; and, perhaps, I will look them up."

The Detective Napoleon arose to go, and the lady ushered him out hospitably. When he was gone she murmured:

"I forgot to ask his name, but he is a lovely man. He listened, and did not interrupt hardly at all while I was talking!"

Jacob Bradstreet went away in a very thoughtful mood. Proof was accumulating against Josiah Winchester, or else he was the victim of a series of circumstances. Taking the statement of the German wife, who asserted that she had seen him married; the evidence of the minister and that of the Flushing lady, and the personal description, it looked as though Josiah had not been the hermit-bachelor represented, but a married man who had not done by his family as he ought.

Young James Blake's feelings toward his father, had been those of bitterness and resentment. Had he ever taken steps to satisfy that grudge?

Bradstreet thought of the anonymous letter in his pocket. The writer had demanded money from Winchester as a reward for keeping his secret. Who had the writer been?

Plainly, the writer of the letter was not the man who had killed Winchester. Appearances

indicated that the letter had been mailed within a few hours, before or after the execution of the deed. Any one who had done, or intended to do, such a crime would not deliberately furnish a clew by sending a letter at such a time.

Neither did it look as though James Blake would write to Winchester. If he had discovered that his father was, really, the Concord street man, he would be likely to face him boldly, if at all.

Reasoning thus, Bradstreet decided that James had no connection with the letter. He was not so sure in regard to the tragedy. The Flushing lady had said that the young man was of the best character, but the detective knew that criminal records bristled with cases where men supposed to be the soul of honor had sent one of their kind out of the world prematurely.

The detective was not one to rush to conclusions. He had seen guilty parties escape before then because other detectives had formed a certain theory at the start, and, being men of one idea, stuck to it only to find, in the end, that they were wrong, and that their blind devotion to one idea had given the real culprits ample time to escape.

Not yet would Bradstreet brand James Blake guilty, but he intended to investigate that young man. He knew of one James Blake in Brooklyn—whether he was the right one remained to be seen.

By the time that he reached the city the day was waning.

Curiosity led him to visit the Concord street ruins, and he found Alden Winchester there. The latter had paid a visit to New York, and looked more respectable than ever in immaculate linen and well-brushed clothing, but his expression was one of deep melancholy.

He started as the detective came upon him.

"No new discovery, I suppose?" Jacob gravely asked.

"Not to my knowledge," Winchester answered.

"I did not know but Nettle had made an arrest."

"He has the parties in mind."

"Do you believe in his theory?"

"What theory?"

"That the deed was done by mere burglars."

"I don't know whether I do or not. I am told that Nettle is a capable man, and was much influenced by his opinion at the start—perhaps more than I should have been. You hold a different theory?"

"Frankly, I do."

"Will you explain it?"

"I cannot explain what is not yet explained to myself. Far be it from me to say that Nettle is wrong; he may be right. All that I do say is that I suspect there may have been events in your late brother's life not generally known, and out of those events may have grown the crime. This is a possibility—I do not say that I believe it."

Winchester looked only at the ground, but shook his head.

"I do not agree with you, but I will not press the point. Heaven knows that I want my brother's murderer, or murderers, caught, let them be who they may. If it is you, instead of Nettle, who does this, I shall feel grateful to you—nay, more: I will give you a thousand dollars out of my own pocket!"

The New Yorker's gaze was suddenly raised, and he looked Bradstreet in the face unflinchingly.

The latter knew of the alleged identification by Barnes, and wondered if there was anything in it. Barnes was positive that he saw Winchester at the corner of Sands and Jay streets, the night of the murder, while the gentleman insisted that he had been in New York. Which was right?

Certainly, Winchester did not look like an assassin.

On the other hand, Jacob could not help noticing that the gentleman had suddenly substituted cordiality for the coldness and indifference shown on the previous occasion. Did this mean that he had decided that it was best to gain the detective's good will, or that devotion to his brother had led him to make any sacrifice to have the guilty parties punished?

To the last proposition Bradstreet quietly replied:

"As you are aware, I am in the service of the insurance company, and I cannot agree to take anything from another source. When the work is done, I will, if the result satisfies you, talk with you further."

"In the meanwhile, I trust that you will not spare any effort or money."

"Decidedly not."

"My brother's tragic end has thus far occupied my thoughts, to the exclusion of everything else, but I am beginning to think more of the assassins. They must be found and captured!"

The speaker looked Steady Hand fully in the face, and his lips closed firmly.

"I agree with you, Mr. Winchester."

"Bear in mind that I stand ready to pay any reasonable bill you may present."

"I will remember."

Winchester's manner indicated that he had said all he had to say, and it had been manfully

done, but he had not left a good impression on the detective's mind. Less than twenty-four hours before he had indicated to the New Yorker that, in connection with the investigation, he thought it would be well to look for the writer of the anonymous letter. If Alden was so much in earnest, why did he not, at least, refer to the document which made threats of a certain degree against the deceased?

Why, unless the surviving brother was keeping something back?

Nothing could have induced Bradstreet to confide fully in Mr. Alden Winchester, at that stage of the game.

Private conversation was interrupted by the appearance of a third man, who at once made himself known. Others looked at the ruins with curiosity, but he was as calm as though the fire-friend had not raged there at all.

He sidled up to them, in a confidential manner, and blandly observed:

"It's a fine day, gents; a mighty fine day; an' it nat'rally makes a man think o' the rural scenes where the lambs are friskin' in the beds o' roses, an' the bee is sippin' the nectar from the terbarker plant. Don't it strike you so, gents?"

"If I have been struck, I did not feel the blow," replied Bradstreet, ungraciously.

"That's 'cause you ain't up in agriculture. You ought ter improve yer knowledge on't, an' here is jest the thing fur the job. I hev' here, gents, Willoughby's Manual o' Rural Ideas, a book which should be in ev'ry man's pocket. Shows the cause o' late Springs, an' how ter prevent 'em; tells the best way o' plannin' what you'll do on the farm next year, an' how ter git out o' doin' it when the time comes; explains why weeds, muskeeters an' snakes are necessary on a farm; tells why onions an' brains won't mix—"

"We will take the rest for granted," Bradstreet interrupted. "Who are you, anyhow?"

"Me? Oh! I'm Old Cy Crookback, sometimes called Clover Crookback; an' I peddle this rural manual. It tells why flies are thicker in summer than in winter—"

"We don't care to know, Mr. Crookback."

"Mebbe t'other gentleman does."

"I am not a farmer," impatiently answered Winchester.

Old Cy nudged him slyly.

"Say, don't remember me, do yer?" he asked.

"Remember you? No!"

"I was in thar when Lemuel Barnes swore he seen ye at the corner o' Sands an' Jay streets, the night yer brother was killed, when you said ye was in New York."

Crookback had brought his voice to a whisper, but it was not a success. Bradstreet could hear all plainly, and the peddler only made himself ridiculous. He nudged Winchester again and winked him, but only succeeded in making that gentleman flush and look uncomfortable.

"You are drunk!" he exclaimed.

"Me, drunk?" echoed Cy.

"That's what I said. Now, get out of here, or I will chastise you!"

"But I didn't say you was over here the night o' the murder," expostulated the old man.

"Do you hear me? Clear out!"

Winchester spoke with increased sharpness, and, taking a forward step, raised his cane over the peddler's head.

CHAPTER IX.

THE PICTURE AND THE WOMAN.

"I'll go!—I'll go!" said Crookback, hastily. "Now I think on't, I b'lieve I've got an engagement elsewhere. I'll go, but I wish I could sell ye a copy of Bumble's Country Directory afore I leave. Best book on agriculture out. Shows how ter keep hens from diggin' up the garden, an' how ter raise three crops o' weeds in one season—Don't want the book, did ye say? All right; thar's them who is hankerin' ter buy, an' I will sell ter them."

He started off with a painful limp not before observed in his gait, but paused when he had gone a few yards.

"Ef you'll buy a book I'll swear an *alibi* fur you the night o' the fire. You may need the *alibi*, an' I know you'll need the book."

"The scoundrel!" muttered Winchester, irritably.

"The fellow is not worthy of notice," observed Bradstreet, consolingly.

"I should say not."

"Probably he is out of his mind; the idea of peddling a work on agriculture in Brooklyn is not that of a sane man."

"Oh! of course he is deranged," Winchester quickly agreed. "Well, Bradstreet, I am going now, but I will see you again. Good-day!"

The detective responded, and then the New Yorker walked away. Jacob went in the opposite direction, which happened to be the same that Crookback had taken. On reaching Washington street the detective turned toward City Hall, and had nearly reached the square when he came upon a crowd collected on one corner.

Some enterprising genius had something to sell, and, as usual, there were enough to look and listen. As Bradstreet neared the place the fakir's words, volubly spoken, became audible to him.

"Here you are, ladies and gentlemen! Walk

right up and secure your bargains! Tangible evidence in the Winchester murder case. Correct pictures of the late Mr. Winchester, and of the parties now under suspicion as his assassins. Only ten cents each; or a complete set of four, for twenty-five cents. Buy, and any one of you may be the means of recognizing and arresting the murderers!"

Curious to know what new fraud was being perpetrated on the public, the Detective Napoleon joined the group. The first thing he saw was a large, gilt-framed, bust portrait of a man somewhat past middle age. The first sight was a surprise, for it looked very much as he had mentally pictured Josiah Winchester. Later, he learned that the picture was genuine, but he did not stop to study it then.

The fakir had several cheap, miserable photographs of "imperial" size in his hand, and more on the little stand by his side, and he was busy with his loquacious calls for custom.

Of the photographs one resembled the portrait, but, as Bradstreet at once saw, was that of a different person. As he had expected, the seller was a fraud. The pictures of the alleged criminals might have been those of Judas Iscariot, Captain Kidd and Bluebeard, or anybody else; they simply represented brutal faces.

As the whole thing was a swindle—except the portrait—Bradstreet thought that the man would come to grief as soon as an officer discovered his game, but the detective was not disposed to interfere, himself. Probably the fakir's "assassins" were about as genuine as Nettle's.

The portrait again called Jacob's attention. It was very fair work, but the paint was still fresh, and, he judged, it was a copy of an original, recently made.

As his gaze wandered away he chanced to observe a lady approaching. She held a parcel in her hand, and had evidently been shopping, but her expression was thoughtful, and she did not show any consciousness of what the fakir was saying, or why the crowd was assembled.

Both ladies and gentlemen were there, and she did not hesitate to take the shortest course and pass directly through. Not until the center of the group was reached did she arouse from her fit of meditation—then the portrait, standing on an easel, intervened almost in her path.

She saw it—hesitated—stopped.

Bradstreet was still watching. He saw a swift change appear in her face. Its calmness vanished; she grew suddenly pale; her eyes dilated with surprise; and she stared blankly at the portrait.

"This, ladies and gentlemen," called out the vender, touching the portrait with a long stick he carried, "is the picture of the murdered man!"

The unknown lady gasped as though for breath; her parcel fell unheeded to the pavement; she put out one hand like a blind person seeking to feel the way, and then fell in a dead faint in the arms of the nearest man.

The latter was Clover Crookback. Bradstreet had thought that no one but himself had observed the lady's agitation; but, however it may have been with Old Cy, he was at hand just when needed, and he caught her with skill not to be surpassed.

Not until she fainted did the others in the group realize that anything was wrong. When they did there was confusion, and they crowded nearer—all but the vender. He hastily gathered up his property and disappeared.

There was a shower of advice, good and bad, in the case of the senseless body, but Bradstreet and Crookback did what was better than mere talk; they carried her to an adjacent drug-store, where she at once received attention.

A little later a man bustled in, and Jacob recognized Nettle.

"Hullo! you here?" quoth the new-comer.

"I seem to be."

"You are not the woman who fainted?"

"Unlike you, I do not faint. Ask Captain Molliss."

Nettle had thought himself very witty, but had only succeeded in recalling, by his sneer, an unpleasant episode in his own career. It was current history in Brooklyn that, when a patrolman, he had once "fainted" rather than go into danger.

He now flushed with embarrassment, but tried to hide it.

"What's all the racket, anyhow?" he blustered.

"You seem ter be makin' it," observed Crookback.

"Hullo! are you there, ragamuffin?"

"I ain't nowhar else."

"You may get into jail yet."

"Ef I do, I'll ask for you."

"Jake, cur ragged friend hasn't relieved the woman of her purse or jewels, has he?"

"I don't know—better ask him," indifferently returned Steady Hand.

"Yes, ask me!" cried Old Cy, shaking his fist at Nettle. "Ask me! Call me a thief, ef ye dare! Six months in jail fur libel, sure pop! Call me a thief, will ye? Do it! Come on! Whar's yer sand?"

"It hasn't gone into a hump and lodged between my shoulders!" Nettle retorted.

"Now you're talkin', mister. I've got a hump

on my back, but natur' put it thar. She knows what a feller needs. She knowed *your* strong p'int was ter gobble down grub, an' she put the hump on yer stomach. Some folks do run ter development under the waistband, instead o' back o' the furrud."

Clover Crookback was excited, and he did not calm down easily. He kept in motion while he talked, and occasionally swung out one fist at the air, as though he wished Nettle was there. In fact, he showed a degree of temper not usual to him, and added to the general opinion that he was a crank.

The druggist, in the meanwhile, failing to bring the lady to as readily as he wished, had taken the liberty of examining her purse. He found a card therein, and read the inscription upon it. Bradstreet had not been for a moment forgetful of the fact that, judging by appearances, she had fainted at sight of the portrait on the easel. Such a surprising fact was not to be passed over lightly, and he had determined to know more before losing sight of her.

As the druggist laid the card down, he stepped forward and read what was there. It was a single name—as follows:

"Leobelle V. Blake."

The name came like a revelation, and the detective did not need to study to decide where he had heard it before. He remembered the names of the children of the Flushing Blakes—James and Leobelle.

The lady of the present case was not Leobelle. The one was certainly past forty; the other was said not to be yet twenty years old.

Who, then, was it? Who, unless Leobelle's mother?

Who else, with Leobelle's card in her pocket, should faint at sight of Josiah Winchester's picture?

Bradstreet experienced a feeling of exultation. He was making progress, and making it right under unsuspecting Nettle's eyes.

The latter came forward and read the card. Bradstreet watched him keenly as he did so, but not a feature betrayed recognition. He tossed the card down again.

"I can't stop to fool over hysterical women," he remarked. "This is about in your line, Jake, and I will leave you to care for her."

"As you will."

"Perhaps," added Nettle, with a sneer, "she may aid you to discover Winchester's assassins."

"If I get a clew from her," calmly answered Bradstreet, "I will let you hear of it, later."

"Do so. So-long!"

Nettle walked out without any suspicion that his last flippant remark might some time be brought back to his memory in such a way as to cause him regret and mortification.

Having seen himself rid of his rival, Bradstreet looked only at the lady. She was already giving signs of returning consciousness, and, under the druggist's labors, recovery was soon made complete.

She opened her eyes, and he hastened to assure her of safety. She was calmer than was to be expected.

"I trust that you are better," he added.

"Did I faint?" she asked, in surprise.

"Yes."

"It never happened to me before."

"Do not be alarmed about it—'twas only a passing attack, and I do not think you will suffer any inconvenience. This gentleman"—he indicated the detective—"was, fortunately, at hand, and he brought you in. I judge that your name is Blake."

"How did you know that?"

"This card explains it."

"Ah! Yes; I am Mrs. Blake."

"Pray was there any particular cause for your sudden illness?"

Bradstreet saw her give a quick glance outside. The street was as quiet as usual. She closed her lips firmly and answered:

"No; there was no cause other than a sudden illness!"

CHAPTER X.

A MAN WHO WALKS ON THE WATER.

THE druggist, having no reason to doubt this statement, accepted it with the readiness of one who feels no interest. He had seen other women brought fainting to his store before then, and expected more in the future.

Jacob Bradstreet, however, was not deceived. He knew that it was the sight of Josiah Winchester's picture which had caused all the trouble, and, though he was naturally calm and sympathetic, and nothing more, he drew his own conclusions.

It was certain that he had found the Mrs. Blake who once lived at Flushing, and it was nearly as certain that she had recognized her husband's likeness in Josiah Winchester's picture.

Was it strange that she had fainted when the street-peddler touched the portrait with his rod and announced: "This is the picture of the murdered man?"

Guilty or innocent, such a sight would naturally be a great shock to her nerves.

"Shall I order a cab to take you home, madam?" the detective courteously asked.

"No; thank you; I am myself again, and quite able to walk."

There did not seem to be any cause to question this statement. She was, naturally, of good health, and not a tremor betrayed that she still felt the effects of her recent shock. The composure was not the result of hardihood or strength of will, for she was of a refined and womanly nature. Bradstreet suspected that the explanation lay in the fact that her husband had long before destroyed her affection for him.

"Have you far to walk?" he added.

"Not far, thank you."

She was standing near the door, and, at that moment, she looked out and saw a young man passing.

"My son!" she exclaimed. "Excuse me, gentlemen, if I leave you hurriedly. I thank you very much, indeed, for your kindness. I hope you will as fortunately find friends when you need them. Thank you, and—good-day!"

Speaking these words hurriedly, she opened the door and passed out, hastening to join the young man.

Bradstreet yawned in an indolent way.

"Well, I don't see that our aid is needed further," he carelessly observed, "so I will go home and get a cup of tea."

"That's medicine enough for a male biped," added the druggist, wholly unsuspecting that a drama was going on around him.

The Detective Napoleon went out quietly, but his careless air was all a pretense. He intended to follow the Blakes. In the young man he had recognized the James whom he knew by sight—and he was the same James Blake whom the reader has seen visit the scene of the fire in company with his friend, Dudley Leland—but, even with all this information at hand, he did not care to rely upon the Directory for their address.

It might not be there, anyhow, while, by following them, he could soon see where they went.

Mrs. Blake had taken her son's arm, and they were walking down Washington street. That street was not the best in the world for the detective's work, and he would rather have had them on Fulton street, but a novice could have done the work in this case. They did not look around once.

Bradstreet could see that the lady was telling her story. She was talking earnestly and steadily, and James was listening with equal attention.

Clearly, what Mrs. Blake had seen had caused a sensation.

The pursuit was not of great duration. They soon turned to the left, crossed Fulton street and walked up Hicks, where they ultimately entered an old, plain house. The door closed behind them, and there was no more to be seen. The detective turned back.

What did the late discoveries signify?

First, that Josiah Winchester had been a married man.

Secondly, that the family he had deserted was living in Brooklyn, and, in all probability, he had discovered two of its members.

Thirdly, he believed that Alden Winchester had known of, or suspected, the concealed romance in his brother's life.

Assuming that these inferences were correct, two most important questions arose: Why did the surviving brother persist in denying all knowledge of these affairs? and—most important of all—had the Blakes guilty knowledge of Josiah's violent death?

These were questions which the detective was bound to solve. His rival, Nettle, was waving all these possibilities aside, or, rather, as much as he knew of them, but Bradstreet was willing that he should devote his time to looking for burglars whose identity he had settled without a particle of evidence. But Jacob was willing to follow another line of operations, and win or lose on the risk.

Having eaten supper he made a call, and was soon knocking at the door of the house where lived Lemuel Barnes. That gentleman was at home, and received the visitor politely.

"I understand, Mr. Barnes," said Jacob, "that you have given evidence before the police with results not satisfactory to you."

"The police are blockheads!" declared Barnes, with emphasis. "But," he suddenly added, "perhaps you belong to the force?"

"I am a detective, but that need not influence you. I do not 'belong to the force,' but am an independent."

"As a rule," returned Barnes, with great frankness, "I do not believe in private detectives. Many of them are mere scoundrels who use their position to act as systematic blackmailers of the unfortunate. I do not apply that to you, for there are some honest private detectives, and you look all right."

"I appreciate your frankness, Mr. Barnes, and admit that there are private detectives who have stolen the livery of law to serve Satan in—to change an old expression somewhat. Now, then, what about the men you saw at the corner of Sands and Jay streets?"

"One was Alden Winchester!"

"Are you sure?"

"Yes."

"But he says he was not in Brooklyn that night."

"Let him say it."

"You will not believe him?"

"I will not."

"This man gave the other man a key by which, he said, Number Two could secretly enter a certain house?"

"Yes."

"What do you infer?"

"Simply that Number Two then went to Josiah Winchester's house."

"But the police account for the criminal's entrance there on the theory of a broken pane of glass, and, as a consequence, opened window."

"Hang the police, and their theories!" exclaimed Barnes, with an amount of contempt which showed a lamentable lack of faith in the city guardians.

"You, then, suspect Alden Winchester?"

"I do. Why not? He was Josiah's heir!"

"But he is said to be rich."

"Just the kind of man to be greedy. Besides, he may be financially embarrassed."

"I should be glad to have you tell me, in detail, just what you saw at the street corner, that night."

Barnes was not reluctant, and he gave the story in a more detailed manner than when at the police-station. His rebuff at the latter place had served to make him all the more obstinate and positive, and he brought out the suspicious points with considerable dramatic power. The possibilities regarding the key and the "cans" lost nothing at his hands.

The detective listened and considered, but neither gave nor formed an opinion. Alden Winchester might, or might not, be guilty. It was his business to sift all the facts and learn the truth, not to pronounce sentence on any one until all was settled. Knowing that the chief weakness of detectives was to work on a theory, instead of to gather general facts, he had always made it a point to avoid the rocks upon which many a case had gone to pieces.

The fact that he did not dispute Barnes on any point pleased that gentleman, and, when the story was told, he meditated for a moment and then suddenly spoke further:

"I had decided not to waste any information on the police—I was mad when they snubbed me so, and doubted my word—but you seem to be a decent fellow. Do you remember that a boatman came in and told about a man who walked on the water? But you wasn't there."

"I heard of his remarkable statement."

"Not caring to be classed as a madman, I won't undertake to say whether Oakes and O'Day saw what they say, but there is one circumstance worth telling. When O'Day told the police, he wasn't believed any more than I was, and we exchanged grievances on the way home. This led to my going down to the pier to see his mate, Zeb Oakes. The latter told the story as O'Day had done, but something more came of it."

"What?"

"As we stood there, Oakes happened to look down, and there, near his feet, lay a big brass key."

"Indeed!"

"Yes; and it lay right opposite the place where the water-walker was first seen—where he would have taken to the water if he had just come from the land when the boatmen saw him walk out from between the two piers."

Steady Hand was altogether too practical to believe in the existence of a man who walked on the water. As a detective he was bound to sift all evidence, but he felt compelled to decline giving credence to the water-walker."

"What do you infer in regard to the key?" he asked.

"Nothing at all. I simply tell you this, and leave you to decide what to do. Oakes has the key."

"It will do no harm to see the key."

"I'll take you to Oakes at once."

Jacob acquiesced. He was not foolish enough to place any faith in the possibility that he was going to find any clue in the mere fact that a key had been discovered in the streets of Brooklyn, but was willing to see the boatmen and talk with them about the Water-Walker.

While he had been in Barnes's house, night had fallen. The sky was clear and the stars out in force, but the moon was not visible. Thus, when they reached the water-front, they could see well out on the great stream, without having a strong light.

O'Day was away, but Zeb Oakes was on the pier, drawing consolation from a short, black pipe. He readily produced the big brass key of which Bradstreet had been told.

"There it is," he observed, "an' ef you kin make anything out of it, all right. O'Day says it was the key Barnes seen give ter the big feller on the corner o' Jay street; an' that it was used ter git inter Winchester's house; an' that the murderer then escaped by this course, an' dropped the key; an' that he walked on the water; an' that he was Old Nick in person. Make all on't you kin!"

"Mr. Oakes, you look like an intelligent man," Jacob replied.

"I am," Zeb agreed, with straightforward modesty.

"And you mean to say that the unknown man walked on the water?"

"Of course I do."

"Honest Injun?"

"I hate ter hev ye doubt my word, but you'd be a fool ef ye didn't doubt it in this case," bluntly confessed Oakes. "Commodore, as true as you live we saw a man cross the East River on the water, walkin' like you or I would do on land. I hadn't dranked a drop, either."

"You pursued the man, and failed to catch him?"

"Yes. O'Day was so skeered that we was slow in gettin' away, an' we was altogether too late. I never seen the like before, nor expect to ag'in—"

He stopped short as Bradstreet suddenly seized his arm and pointed to the river.

"Look!" the detective exclaimed; "the river mystery is there again!"

Sure enough, and, while the trio gazed in startled wonder, the unknown being was seen calmly walking on the water's surface!

CHAPTER XI.

A GOOD MAN LOSES HIS TEMPER.

On the same evening last referred to, two men met on one of the streets of New York. One immediately bore down upon the other.

"Aha! Ridlon, my friend!" he exclaimed, "you are the man I want to see."

"Am I?" was the somewhat ungracious reply.

"Surely, you are that!" was the airy reply.

"What wrinkle is in your head now, Ruric Demidoff?" asked the Ridlon.

"Come in and have a drink, and you shall hear."

"That's something I never refuse."

They entered a saloon. It was one well known in police annals. Several times it had figured in cases in court, and its proprietor and its customers were alike under suspicion at all times. It was known that evil deeds were planned there, and not a few executed under its roof, yet it had never been closed. Some honest people wondered why a license was granted it, and found no explanation except that its proprietor was a prominent ward politician. Others asserted that it had no license, and was run in nominal defiance of the law. However that was, it was one of the many low resorts of Gotham so aptly described by the word "dives."

Demidoff and Ridlon entered. The first thing to be seen was a bar-room. It was fairly kept, and would give no suggestion of law-breakers or law-breaking to the casual customer. They did not stop there, however, but passed on, opened a push-door which opened jauntily on nimble-working hinges, and entered a second room. This was a large place with as many tables as could be crowded into it, and with four chairs at each table. Originally, these tables and chairs had been of the regulation saloon color, a peculiar brown; but time had dealt severely with them, and they had been varnished to cover defects until they were like Joseph's coat, both as to color and patches.

Demidoff and Ridlon sat down.

"Perhaps you guess my business, Steve," observed Steve's companion.

"No good, I'm sure."

"Bah! why do you talk that way?"

"Demidoff, you know as well as I do that I have but little faith in you."

"Why not?"

"I think you are a police spy!"

"Heaven bless you, man!—I am only a humble teacher of the art of using a sword; humble in myself, but master of the grand art, and a teacher such as only Russia can turn out."

"If you adore your native land so, why not stay there?"

"Bless you, man! it would be the death of me. Look you, Steve Ridlon, I am Russian to the core of my heart. No one loves his country more than I—and that is why I am here in America. In Russia there is no liberty; there is only injustice. I cannot bear injustice, and my rebellion nearly cost me my life in St. Petersburg. When I was able to escape I came here, and here I will remain. Much rather would I be in my beloved Russia, using my sword upon my enemies, but what can one man do against a million? I must be content to stay in New York and teach Americans how to use the sword."

"Some of my friends who have taken lessons of you have fallen into the hands of the police," answered Ridlon, suspiciously.

"But not through me—I swear it!"

"Well, what do you want of me now?"

"You have heard of the Brooklyn murder?"

"I have read it."

"Also that certain men are suspected?"

"That consummate ass, Nettle, says he has certain men in mind—old burglars."

"Do you know whom?"

"No."

"Stevie, I suspect that you are one of them."
 "The deuce you do!"
 "I can't help thinking so."
 "Why do you think it?"
 "Nettle has been inquiring where you are."
 "Inquiring of *you*?"
 "Now, don't fly off at a tangent. Why will you so suspect me? I tell you that you do me wrong when you mark me down as a friend of the police. Some of my pupils are on the blue-coated force, and I should be a fool not to seek their favor. So of my other pupils—some are blue-bloods, and some are shady gents; but I want to keep all on my list. Should I add to my income by giving information against such of my customers as are on the 'shady' list, and having them shut up in Sing Sing? Not much! And, Steve, haven't I more than once given the tip to my 'shady' friends that the police were onto them?"

"Well, well, Demidoff, you may be all right; I won't accuse you, but the man who seeks to be everybody's friend is like the one who tried to sit on two stools at once. It can't be made a success. I won't say that you ever peached on any of the lads, though there are some strange things of which I never yet had an explanation. But what about Nettle and his inquiry concerning me?"

"He has been asking a friend of mine where you are, and from the fact that the papers say he has two or three burglars in mind as the murderers of Winchester, I can't help thinking that his inquiry for you is suspicious. Nettle must know what your trade is."

"Hush!"

Ridlon looked around apprehensively, but there appeared to be nothing to worry him. A seedy old man had entered the room soon after they did, and sat down at an adjacent table. Ridlon did not think the stranger was near enough to overhear what they said, anyway, and he seemed to have fallen asleep.

"Don't refer to my trade," cautioned the burglar, in a low voice.

"All right."

"What did Nettle want to know about me?"

"Merely where you were, but my friend told him he did not know—thought you were out of town."

"Didn't Nettle drop any hint of what he wanted?"

"No."

"If the fool thinks I did that Brooklyn job, he is away off."

"You had better keep away from him."

"Why so, if I am innocent?"

"Could you prove an *alibi*?"

"Not one that would go, I fear."

"Then shun Nettle."

"Why should the idiot have his eye on me? There ain't a particle of evidence. What if I am a burglar? There are hundreds of honest New Yorkers in the same business. Were they all concerned in the killing of Winchester? Rubbish! Say, that Nettle is the biggest fool that ever started out as a detective!"

The burglar exhibited a good deal of annoyance, but that did not necessarily prove that he was guilty. He had a bad reputation, and had to suffer for it. He felt aggrieved that he should be suspected when not guilty, and gave no credit to the chance which saved him from suspicion when he was not innocent.

Under which head he came now he was not certain.

Just then there was a faint tinkling of a bell at the further end of the room. It acted like magic upon Demidoff and Ridlon. They leaped to their feet, and, without the least hesitation, ran to the rear. There a second door was to be seen. They gave one hurried glance toward the bar room and then opened the door and passed out.

Their abrupt departure might have puzzled one not informed as to the ways of the place, but the tinkling of the bell had been a signal well understood by them. Partitioned off from the bar-room was an office, and the proprietor, or a substitute, was always on hand there. Long experience had made most of the city detectives, and other officials, known to these friends of thieves, and, the moment that a known officer entered the outside room, the news was promptly conveyed to the rear room by touching an electric bell. Then every one who had cause to fear investigation would promptly retreat by a way provided at the rear.

A brief pause followed this sudden retreat, and then into the rear room came three men. The foremost was the redoubtable Truman Nettle, detective.

He looked eagerly around the place, and then his face fell. Plainly, he had expected to see more than was visible.

"He ain't here," remarked one of Nettle's companions.

"Not unless he's in hiding."

Nettle shifted his gaze to the only stranger there—the seedy old man before referred to—and then speedily discovered that he was not a stranger.

It was Clover Crookback.

A wave of suspicion swept over the detective. Old Cy appeared to be fast asleep, but Truman had no faith in that slumber. He walked for-

ward and shook the book-agent roughly, whereupon Cy stirred, raised his head and opened his eyes. He certainly looked sleepy enough.

"Wh—wh—what's the matter?" he stammered.

"What are you doing here?" Nettle growled.

"I'm settin' down, an' I was asleep."

"Where is Steve Ridlon?" angrily demanded the detective.

"Where's *who*?"

"Ridlon."

"Don't know no sech man."

"Now, don't lie to me, old fellow. I've got my eye on you, and I'll have you in limbo before you know it."

"Deary me! how you *do* talk!" returned Old Cy, holding up both hands in horror. "What in tarnation hev I done ter r'ile ye up so awful?"

"You gave Ridlon the tip to get out."

"Get out? What fur?"

"I saw you prowling about at Brooklyn, when I was getting ready to come over, and it's clear that you listened to what I said, and then came here and warned Ridlon."

"Deary me! I didn't do nothin' o' the sort," Crookback protested. "I ain't listened ter nothin', an' never heard o' Ridlon afore. Who is he? Whar is he?"

"That's what I want you to say."

"But I don't know."

"Come off! I'm onto you, old man; you're an ally of the knaves in this game, and I suspect that you know more about the Winchester murder than an honest man should. Anyhow, I'll run you in."

"Run me in?" echoed Clover dismally.

"Nothing short of that. You've cheated me out of my other prisoner, and you shall sweat for it. I arrest you in the name of law!"

CHAPTER XII.

OLD CY IS UNDER SUSPICION.

CLOVER CROOKBACK did not seem to be alarmed in the least by this announcement.

"Don't know of any good reason why you should arrest me," he answered. "I ain't never hurt you nor your folks, hev I?"

"The law knows no distinctions."

"Then why not let up on me? I'm a distinction, an' I had rather not be arrested. I'm peddlin' a great agricultural work, an' it would hurt the sales like p'ison ef the folks had ter come ter the jail ter buy o' me. The shootin'-stars o' Murray Hill wouldn't come thar—unless they was arrested too. I'd like ter sell ye a copy, an' I'll show ye the book—"

"No, you won't; I don't want to see it!" growled Nettle.

"Why not search for our men, instead of dealing in idle talk?" asked one of Nettle's companions.

"No use; they've escaped. All we've got is this man, but we'll keep him fast."

"What's the charge ag'in' me?" Cy asked.

"Giving warning to your late companions."

"That charge won't go!" declared Nettle's companion.

"Why not?"

"Where is the proof?"

"There is suspicion—"

"You can't hold the man simply because he was in this room," was the decided reply.

"That's jest my idee," added Clover Crookback, as quietly as though some minor point was being discussed. "I didn't know the men who was in here, an' didn't speak ter them, at all. I've been trampin' 'bout all over New York, an' come hyar ter rest arter my arduous labors in puttin' Benson's Agricultural What-not afore the Gotham public—"

"Spare us the rest."

"I think the man should be arrested," persisted Nettle.

"Unless you have more evidence, it can't be done."

Nettle stood silent, sullen and dejected. Not having any one else upon whom he could lay his hands, he wanted the old peddler. Steve Ridlon was one of the men he had suspected from the first—suspected simply because Ridlon had served time as a burglar, and was thought to be at his old tricks—and, as Steve had escaped, Nettle had wished to cover his discomfiture by seizing *somebody*. It would have been more to the purpose to take the people who ran the place, and he knew it, but he knew also, that he could never convict them.

He had seen that game tried before, and good luck, or something else had always saved them.

While he hesitated another man entered the room. He was a tall, well-built young fellow who was well and modestly dressed, and seemed out of place in the dive.

His eyes brightened at sight of Clover Crookback, and then he turned a doubtful gaze upon the officers. These gentlemen gave him only casual attention.

"We may as well go," announced Nettle's leading companion.

"And give up our game?"

"What else can we do?"

"I suspect this fellow with Bedloe's Island on his back."

"Trumpet your affairs to the whole world, if

you will," was the disgusted comment, as the speaker glanced at the latest comer.

Old Cy bent a look upon Nettle which was far from friendly.

"A sassy tongue shows a black heart," he retorted. "You've seen fit ter cast slurs at the hump on my back. Who put it there? Who made Bedloe's Island? Who give you a block o' wood fur a head? My hump was prob'ly put thar fur a purpose, an' it was ter keep down pride. The Lord made you weak-minded so that you couldn't do so much harm, an' now yer venom crops out in mean speeches. Plainly, you wa'n't properly brung up. Had a dad an' marm who let you hev yer own way at all times, an' be a nuisance ter other folks by being mean an' sassy, eh? Like child, like man. You're a reptile—"

"Be still, old man, or I will arrest you, anyhow!" cried Nettle, pale with anger.

Once more his companion interfered.

"Let the old man go."

"Then, Jones, he must go at once. Clear out, Crookback, or I will take you in!"

"Yes, go, my good man, go!" Jones urged, soothingly.

"Wal, I will," Cy consented, "fur I've got ter sell a few o' my agricultural books afore bedtime. Tells how ter train crows ter pull up weeds, instead o' corn—"

He was still muttering when he went out, following close after the tall stranger, who had satisfied his curiosity easily, it seemed. Nettle still looked sulky, but Jones caught his arm.

"Be still, you lubber! Ain't you on?" he asked.

"On to what?" Nettle asked.

"Did you see the stranger give old Crookback the tip?"

"No. What tip?"

"If the stranger did not give the old fellow a wink and motion to meet him outside, then I have no eyes. Your hot head would have ruined all, if I had let you go on, but I intend to spot our daisies. You let me alone, and I'll pipe them!"

He started for the door.

"I know your 'stranger'; he's named Carlos Edlock," announced Nettle. "He's an honest man, too—at least, I think so; I never spoke with him."

"I'll remember."

Jones glided out quietly, but did not use the front door. There was a side exit which led to another street, and he intended to use this and get a point on Crookback and Edlock. He thought they had gone out for a conference, and if there really was any understanding between them, they would probably look to see that they were not followed.

He had reached the outer door when he paused suddenly. The weather being warm the door proper was open, and screen doors of the house-blind pattern were in their place, thus admitting air while affording concealment.

Jones had secured a look through the blinds, by chance, before swinging the doors back, and that look was enough to make him refrain from opening them at all.

He saw Crookback and Edlock outside, not five feet away, engaged in conversation.

He determined to listen from where he was. This was a little hall off of the bar-room, a place to which thirsty men and women came who wished to buy by the quart of the fluids within. Unless he was interrupted, a better place of concealment could not have been desired.

The voices outside arose plainly.

"Now, old man," Edlock was saying, "you don't want to deny all this. I know that *you* know something about Josiah Winchester's murder!"

"You hurt my feelin's—you do, by tarnation. I ain't no measly murderer—"

"I have not said that you are."

"I ain't. I'm a peddler o' a great educational work on the subjick o' farmin', which I sell ter the benighted people o' New York fur the small sum of—"

"This is not to the point. I saw you in Winchester's house the night of the fire—"

"Oh! *you* was thar!"

"I was."

"Why shouldn't I suspect *you*?"

"You can, if you wish. Previous to, and during the fire, I was in the company of a man whose word is good as gold in Brooklyn. Besides," Edlock added, proudly, "I have a reputation in my native city which will bear the closest scrutiny."

"So'll mine. As a dispenser o' rural facks—"

"Cease your everlasting talk about farms and farmers. I don't care a picayune whether potatoes grow in the ground or on trees, as long as I get them. As I said before, you were in Winchester's house at the time of the fire. That is not against you, for I and other men were there at the same time, but you were mighty active for an old man."

"Comes o' my readin' agricultural books, an' gittin' sniffs o' country air out o' them."

"Keep to the point. You went nosing around like one who is trying to discover all he can, rather than like a life-saver, as most of us were. After awhile you found something. I saw you secrete it in the pocket of your coat—thrust it

away as though you were afraid some one else would see it—and I heard you mutter: 'So he has been here!'

Jones saw Old Cy's eyes snap in what appeared to be a vicious way.

"You did, eh?"

"I did."

"Mister, do you ever see double when you're sober?"

"Come, Crookback; that won't do. I'm not open to suspicion; I can prove that I was sober. I saw and heard what I allege."

"You didn't!" snapped Clover.

"Pardon me, but I did."

"You didn't!"

"You put something in your pocket," Edlock persisted, "and it gave you a clew. You said, 'So he has been here!'"

"You're a 'tarnal liar!" declared the old man, with perceptible irritation, but Edlock remained as calm as ever.

"I believe that you found some clew which told you who the burglars were, or, at least, who one of them was."

"I didn't."

"There is only one other inference."

"What's that?"

"Simply that you stole something."

"Me, stole?"

"Yes."

Clover Crookback doubled up his fist and, glaring at Edlock, seemed about to strike, but his face suddenly softened; he looked down curiously at his clinched hand, and then meditatively felt of its brown back and knuckles.

"I'd hit ye ef I dared ter," he said, shaking his head soberly, "but I've read so many books on agriculture, an' got so much clover-loaded country air, that my muskle is somethin' horrible, an' my fist like a mule's off hind heel."

"Do you know you are under suspicion by the police?"

"No. Be I?"

"Yes. Nettle suspects you."

"How do you know?"

"I have it on good authority."

"I don't keer a counterfeit cent fur you or Nettle, either."

"Crookback, you can't take a middle course in this matter; you must blow hot or cold. You're in the swim, sure; Nettle suspects you, and will investigate. If guilty, you had better skip. If innocent, and you have a clew to the real murderers, I shall be glad to share your secret, help run them down, and share the various rewards with you. What do you say?"

CHAPTER XIII.

ANOTHER UNDERCURRENT.

JONES, listening behind the door, was at a loss to fully understand Mr. Edlock. After trying to browbeat Old Cy, he was making a business proposition. Was it because he had decided that he was innocent, or because he had failed to get at the peddler in any other way? And what did Edlock care about the matter, anyhow? He did not look like one in need of the reward of which he spoke. Had he the detective fever?

Clover Crookback was ready with his answer.

"I say jest this," he responded—"I ain't no clew ter them scamps who killed 'Siah Winchester, an' I ain't got no time ter try ter find 'em. Take me fur a border scout, ter go moopin' around fer tracks? I ain't one; I'm a dispenser of a book how ter make onions smell weaker, an'—"

"Is this your ultimatum?" Edlock curtly asked.

"My which—tum?"

"Ultimatum—final decision."

"That's the name on't."

"Then I shall bother no more with you, but I will say frankly that I feel sorry for you, Crookback. You are throwing away your chance of a lifetime. I have some pull with the police, and could get you good usage, but if you don't fall into line with me, you will have to bear the full force of their suspicions."

"Young man, I ain't any idee but that you mean wal," Old Cy gravely returned, "but you're 'way off your base. The p'lice an' I ain't never had no trouble, an' I don't feel no more afraid on 'em than I do of a 'skeeter."

"Suppose I should tell them that, when at the fire, you slyly tucked something under your coat and said: 'So he has been here!' What if I told them that?"

"What a 'tarnal critter you be!" Old Cy thoughtfully muttered. "Ef I was took your way I should fear for my mental balance—I should, by Cain! Wal, I'm off; I've got ter sell a book afore I sleep ter-night. Good-by!"

Crookback shook Edlock's hand with an appearance of good-will, and then moved away. His late companion first looked at his watch and then hastened in the opposite direction.

Jones returned to Nettle.

"Comrade," said he, "it will do no harm to think a trifle on your ideas and look after Cy Crookback."

"Didn't I tell you so?" was the triumphant reply.

"You did."

"Ain't I generally right?"

"Ahem! Well, when you ain't wrong, you're

generally right. But this is not to the point. Old Crookback will bear investigation, and the sooner we learn what his movements were on the night of the murder, the better."

In the meanwhile Edlock was going rapidly toward the south. He lost no time in reaching the East River Bridge and crossing to Brooklyn. Once there, he went directly to the Hicks street house which had the name "Blake" on the door and rung the bell.

It was not until he had repeated the summons that any answer came; then James Blake, looking weary and vexed, opened the door. At sight of Edlock his face brightened.

"Oh! it's you, Carlos, is it?"

"Yes."

"Come in! I'm glad to see you."

"I didn't know but you were busy."

"So I am—so we are—but I am glad to see you, nevertheless."

"It's rather late—"

"Yes, but not for you to call. Besides, there is important work on hand, and I want your strong mind in the case. Do you remember, Carlos"—here James lowered his voice—"what I've told you about my father?"

"Certainly."

"I think we have a clew."

"Indeed! May I ask—"

"You were at the Concord street house today when they took out the body."

"Yes."

"Whose do you suppose it was?"

"Wasn't it Josiah Winchester's?"

"Certainly; but we think there was more in it. In brief, we think that Winchester was Thomas Blake, my father!"

Edlock started back in surprise.

"Bear in mind that I have before told you that the name, Thomas Blake, may have been an assumed one."

"True; but why do you think—"

"Come in and hear."

James threw open the door, and they entered the parlor. Three persons were already present—Mrs. Blake, Dudley Leland, and a comely young lady. This was Leobelle Blake, sister of James.

Edlock was one of James Blake's chosen friends, and he was greeted in a friendly way by all. Possibly there was no great amount of cordiality in Leland's heart, for it was a fact of which no one was ignorant that the two young men were very partial to Leobelle's society. Thus far this had not served to make trouble between them. Each was the friend of James, and the fact compelled them to treat each other well. If it ever came to the point that one won Leobelle, and the other was left out in the cold, no one could foresee the result. The disappointed lover might accept his defeat calmly, and go his way without snowing ill feeling, and he might not.

"I have briefly explained to Carlos what we have been talking about," James announced, "and now propose that we admit him into our confidence."

Neither Mrs. Blake nor Leobelle looked pleased. The latter felt their unhappy position and did not approve of making it known to too many. Mrs. Blake had done no wrong, and had no reason to fear the world, but, in a less degree, she shared her daughter's feelings.

She was not a woman to act a heroic part. Feeling that something was due James's friend, she managed to answer politely:

"Certainly."

"Sit down, Carlos," James added. "There is ample room for your strong mind to work."

"I shall be glad if I can be of service to the family, though I regret the necessity," Edlock returned, in a subdued voice.

"We understand all that," James heartily declared. "Now, then, you are aware that there has always been a mystery about my father. He never was at home over half of the time, his excuse for absence being that of business. That was the order of things from the time when he and mother were married. He was always afraid to put out a dollar for the family—"

"James!" interrupted Mrs. Blake, in mild reproach.

"We must have the truth now, mother, let it be ever so unpleasant. I'll pass lightly over the money part, though. As years went on, he grew more indifferent, and less attentive, and when I was twelve years old I had to leave school, and work to help support mother and Leobelle."

"Sometimes I talked plainly to father, in whom I had no confidence, and I will be frank enough to say that I fear I hastened the evil."

"Father grew more and more indifferent, and finally, about two years ago, deserted us entirely. We had one letter from him in which he said that we would never see him again. We never have."

"After awhile we moved from Flushing to Brooklyn, and since we came here, not a word or a sign has been received from him. Now, something strange has happened."

"My mother had been near City Hall, and was returning by way of Washington street. She was in a thoughtful mood, and when she saw a crowd on the street, did not notice what had drawn them, but started to pass through.

This she had partially done, when she saw a painted portrait set upon a rough easel. The novelty of such a thing in a public street caused her to pause and look more closely. What was her surprise to recognize in the portrait a good likeness of Thomas Blake, my father!"

"Just then a man near at hand touched the picture with a rod, and loudly proclaimed:

"This, ladies and gentlemen, is the picture of the murdered man!"

"Ah!" ejaculated Edlock.

"You can imagine what a shock it was," James continued. "All the city was talking about the Concord street murder, and mother recognized the picture as that of her husband. Is it any wonder that everything seemed to swim around her, and that she fainted dead away?"

"When she recovered she was in a drug-store, and being well cared for. As soon as she was able she left the place, and, as I happened along, she walked home with me. She told me of her experience, and I set out to investigate."

"I learned that the man whose words had so alarmed her was a street fakir, and that he had obtained the portrait by having a copy made from an original. The picture, Carlos, was that of Josiah Winchester!"

"Great heavens!" Edlock exclaimed.

"It is true. I found the original, painted only a short time ago by an artist, who never delivered it, for Josiah Winchester had quarreled over the price; and, having a good look at the picture, I am prepared to swear that it was that of my father. What is the inference? Simply that Thomas Blake and Josiah Winchester were one and the same person!"

"Bear in mind that you may have been deceived by a strong resemblance," urged Dudley Leland. "Such things have been known to occur."

"James ought to know his own father," observed Edlock.

"I do. Whatever name we know him by, he was, really, Josiah Winchester!"

This positive assertion showed that no uncertainty existed in the speaker's mind, but Edlock put in the apologetic reminder:

"But Winchester was said to be a bachelor."

"Does that prove anything? Are not men who lead double lives as common in New York as flies?"

"Beyond doubt there are many such cases."

"Winchester's was one of them, and you will find it so."

"What do you intend to do?"

"Secure the property which is justly ours!"

"There will be a fight over it."

"Let it come. The marriage can be proved. The officiating clergyman is still alive, and we can bring witnesses by the score from Flushing who will swear to our father's identity. I defy any one to beat us."

"Alden Winchester will surely try," suggested Leland.

"If he does he may get involved in trouble himself. I have a vague suspicion that he was at the bottom of all our troubles. My mother, intelligent and good, as she was, and is, was in poor and humble circumstances. Josiah Winchester cared enough for her to make her his wife, but some potent influence kept him from introducing her to the world as his wife. What influence? I think I can see the hand of the brother in this!"

"Perhaps it was in the murder as well," suggested Leobelle, hesitatingly.

"Impossible!" Edlock exclaimed.

"And why impossible?" James demanded.

"Alden Winchester, whatever he may be otherwise, is not a murderer."

"Let us consider the case," answered young Blake, stubbornly. "Let us suppose that Alden is financially embarrassed, or greedy, or, from whatever cause, covetous of his brother's money. Next, suppose that he knew of the secret marriage; knew that he had come to Brooklyn, and that any chance meeting on the street might disclose to us the fact that Thomas Blake was, really, Josiah Winchester. Such being the fact, why should he not make one bold stroke, get the wealthy 'bachelor' out of the way, and inherit his property before it was known that there were other heirs? Once the murdered man was out of human sight, the danger that the wronged wife and her children would discover anything seemed very slight. I ask you, is it not possible that Alden Winchester reasoned thus, and acted accordingly?"

James spoke with considerable dramatic force, and silence followed his words. No one was prepared to answer. He had impressed them strongly, and though there was no proof against Alden Winchester, it was impossible to avoid a feeling of suspicion.

"Let the facts be what they may," young Blake added, "I am going to look into this matter!"

CHAPTER XIV.

THE CHASE OF THE WATER-WALKER.

FOR awhile Bradstreet and his companions were incapable of speech as they saw the mysterious Water-Walker on the river. The light was sufficient to give them a good view, as far

as the unknown being's form went, though not to disclose his face. His gaze seemed to be fixed dead ahead, as usual, and the scene on the pier was unheeded. His feet were moved with the same motion, and the same regularity, which would distinguish a man walking on the shore, and he did not appear to find locomotion on the water at all difficult.

If he had been out on Broadway for an evening walk he could not have been more nonchalant.

Lemuel Barnes finally found speech.

"By thunder! it is the Old Nick, himself!" was the startled exclamation.

"He's the same critter O'Day an' me saw," added Oakes.

As the Water-Walker receded the detective aroused.

"Man a boat!" he exclaimed.

"That's the figger!" Oakes agreed; "we'll run the jigger down!"

"Is your boat at hand?"

"Yes; right here. Come on!"

He started away, and Steady Hand and Barnes promptly followed. All were eager to solve the river mystery. There might be no harm in the creature, but such an unnatural thing was open to suspicion and subject to investigation.

The same craft in which Oakes and O'Day had before made an unsuccessful effort was at hand, and in readiness for use. Zeb caught up the oars, and the trio quickly embarked. As the craft lay some distance below the level of the pier this consumed some time, and more was needed to get clear of a schooner lying close at hand. By the time the open river showed in front of their bow, the Water-Walker was fast receding and had grown dim.

"He's makin' fur the big bridge," observed Zeb. "Mebby he's goin' ter climb one o' the towers, jest for the fun o' the thing."

"Pull hard, Oakes!" the Detective Napoleon directed.

"I will."

The stout boatman proved his assertion by plunging the oars deep into the water and bending his back with a will.

"What do you make of him, Bradstreet?" Barnes asked.

"Nothing, as yet."

"Is it human, or otherwise?"

"Do you believe in ghosts?"

"Hardly."

"Then don't insinuate that I could possibly take such a view. Pardon me if I am curt, but ghosts don't go down with any one but idiots. Who yonder man is I can't say, but he's as much human as you or I. He may be a harmless crank of an inventor, or a dangerous knave."

"Robber chief, perhaps."

"He won't do any more of it!" asserted Zeb Oakes, as he rowed desperately after the unknown.

There was no good cause for this confident assertion. The Water-Walker appeared to be holding his own, and moving with ease in striking contrast to Zeb's frantic efforts. He was nearly on a line with the bridge, and had fair to pass under the center. As chance would have it no other craft big or little, was to be seen, and the pursuers were left to wonder alone as to the nature of the phenomenon.

Zeb's heart was in his work, and he sent the boat down the stream as fast as a working-boat could well be supposed to go. He gained, too, after a while, although not fast enough to give much encouragement as to final success.

A more distinct view was obtained, and they could see the arms and legs of the pursued operate as he went on his way.

Barnes was so excited that he made a trumpet of his hands and shouted:

"Ahoy, there!"

The words rolled out plainly enough, but the Water-Walker did not turn his head, or give any other indication that he heard.

"Hold on a bit, and you can ride!" Barnes added.

Even this inducement proved unavailing. Without turning his head, the river mystery pursued his way as quietly as before, ignoring the hail; but he had swung around toward the New York shore, and, when Zeb saw this, he fell into a worse panic than before.

He was eager to catch the man, let the result be what it might.

He put on a fresh spurt, but it proved disastrous. He was a muscular man, and his efforts bent the oars, until one of them snapped short off, and only the useless handle was left in his grasp. The boat swung around in a random way, and Zeb nearly pitched out, but Jacob caught his arm and held him fast.

"Oh! thunder an' lightning!" groaned the boatman, in disgust.

"The devil protects his own!" Barnes added.

"Take it coolly," the detective advised, his manner in keeping with his advice. "We surely have lost the Water-Walker, now, and—Hello! he's gone!"

Sure enough, the unknown was no longer to be seen. The space between them and the boats which lay by the New York piers was one of water and air, and nothing more.

The Water-Walker had disappeared!

"That's odd!" Barnes muttered.

"Can he have reached land?" inquired Bradstreet, in a meditative, half-unconscious way.

"Not a reach!" Zeb stoutly returned. "He's riz up inter the air, or dived like a fish."

"You give him credit for new powers."

"He's got 'em all."

"It don't seem that he can have reached shore," Barnes acknowledged.

"You are right," added the detective.

"O'Day was right when he said 'twas the Evil One."

"Nonsense, Zeb! Can't the Water-Walker dive and swim like other men? Take your remaining oar and paddle for the pier."

"Right you be!"

Oakes spoke with alacrity, and straightway set out to act as well. He was an old waterman, and could propel a boat in almost any way. He plunged in the single oar, and soon had the craft under very fair headway. It was Bradstreet's idea to land where the Water-Walker would naturally take to the shore, if he were a human being. Something might come of it, Jacob thought.

Something did come of it, but not what he was looking for. Between two piers lay two schooners, side by side, with a narrow strip of open water between them. Neither craft gave any sign of life, or showed any strong light, and the whole area was dark and silent.

The boat was within forty feet of the pier for which it was pointed when the detective suddenly heard the sound of oars. Then out from between the schooners came shooting another boat. It was of considerable size, pulling four oars and well manned, but its size did not prevent its being buoyant and swift.

It flashed out as though under full headway, its oarsmen pulling stoutly, but in silence.

At first, Bradstreet's only thought was to hail them and ask if they had seen the Water-Walker, but there was soon something else to occupy his attention. The boat headed straight for them. Oakes shouted a warning and swung away, but the strange boat promptly followed suit, still kept her nose pointed for them, and came on at full speed.

"Look out!" cried Bradstreet; "you'll be afoul of us yet!"

The warning was not heeded, nor was Zeb's sharper cry. The other craft was driving at them like a shark upon its prey. Oakes made one last effort to escape, but in vain. The larger boat was turned a fraction, just enough to point dead on for their side, and then the crash came.

The result could not be in doubt.

The larger craft, moving at full speed, drove her bow against the frail side of Zeb's boat. There was a crash and rending of wood, and then Zeb and his companions were flung into the water as their crushed and ruined boat reared up under the force of the blow.

Bradstreet was a good swimmer, and the mere fact that he was in the water gave him but little concern. He remained cool, and clearly realized that they had been the victims of a deliberate plot, though who the men were, and why they had attempted anything of the kind, he did not feel able to surmise.

It might have been due to viciousness, pure and simple, or something more might lie back of it.

Catching the water with the ease of a practiced swimmer he made a start for the nearest pier. Not so with Zeb Oakes. The latter was boiling mad over the destruction of his boat, and, the moment that he could recover himself, he turned upon the strangers.

"May Old Nick take you!" he yelled, "but I'll make you sick of that!"

He turned boldly upon the enemy, and a few strokes took him near their boat. Steady Hand had paused, uncertain what Oakes meant to do. Then the detective saw one of the strangers rise to his feet and swing up an oar.

"Look out, Zeb!" Bradstreet cried.

Down came the oar, and it looked as though Zeb's head would be split open, but he dodged with considerable skill and grasped the blade of the oar.

"I'll fix yel!" he roared.

"Come away!" advised Jacob, really alarmed for his ally's safety.

"I'll pay off the score first!"

Zeb was too much excited, and too angry, to have much judgment left, and, defiant of danger, he managed to grasp the side of the craft. The Detective Napoleon, had been in a state of uncertainty, but now he hesitated no longer. Turning, he swam to the aid of his companion.

The latter proved himself a stout self-defender. One of the strangers struck at his head, but Zeb ward off the blow, and then grasped the man by the arm. The next moment he gave a jerk, and his victim came out of the boat like a big fish.

Savage exclamations sounded in the boat, and again a blow was aimed with an oar, but Zeb's captive received half of the stroke, and yelled with pain.

By this time the unknown were like maddened hornets. They vented their wrath in words none too choice, and made instant preparations to demolish the bold Oakes. Bradstreet

was by his side, but not inclined to approve of the fight. With the odds so much against them, it seemed that the result must be disastrous.

CHAPTER XV.

ZEB MAKES A FIND.

ZEB and his captive were fighting like alligators, and making a good deal of splashing and noise. Worthy Zeb was boiling with wrath over the destruction of his boat, and he proceeded to get a measure of satisfaction by hammering his prisoner until the latter roared with pain.

But the strangers' boat was at hand, and several oars were swung up, to Zeb's great danger.

"Let him go, Oakes!" again advised Bradstreet.

"Never a let go!" shouted Zeb.

Down came an oar, and it was purely good luck that a contortion of the fighters saved Zeb's head by a hair's breadth.

"Kill the scoundrel!" ordered a stern voice in the unknown craft.

The detective was wholly at loss how to get Oakes out of his danger, for the odds were too great to admit of successful fighting, but the captive stranger solved the problem. He gave a sudden additional contortion, squirmed out of his coat, left the garment in Zeb's hands, and grasped the side of the boat.

Just then another oar fell, and the flat side of the blade struck Oakes on the shoulder, and, aided by the current, sent him several feet away.

Bradstreet saw his chance and seized his ally.

"Don't be a fool, Zeb!" he exclaimed. "Take time for your revenge; you can get it better alive than dead."

And without any more words he pulled the belligerent boatman toward the pier.

Pursuit was to be expected, but perhaps the strangers feared that they would be brought to justice for maliciously running down the smaller craft. Their immersed companion was assisted into the boat, and then they resumed their oars and pulled away for the Brooklyn shore in haste.

In the mean while Jacob had worked Oakes along to the pier, and Barnes, who had already landed, gave them a hand and helped them up.

Zeb was none the worse for his rough experience, and he shook the water from his saturated garments in dog-fashion.

"It's all right, I s'pose," he grumbled, "but it ain't my way ter let up on a gang like that!"

"What chance would we have had with such a force against us?" the detective asked.

"We could 'a' made things interestin' fur them."

"What would they have been doing in the mean while?"

"Hammerin' us, likely."

"Bravery is all right, Zeb, but recklessness is another matter."

"They stove in my boat, an' it's gone down."

"I will pay for the boat, and, also, do my best to learn who the men were."

"You will?"

"Certainly. The boat was lost in my service."

"You're a brick, but I won't take pay for it."

"We will see, later."

"We've lost the Water-Walker," observed Barnes.

"There is no doubt of that."

"What do you make of him?"

"It is useless to speculate."

"Do you think he was a supernatural being?"

"Nonsense!" Bradstreet returned. "Ghosts don't go in these days; only men and women walk the earth with reason to guide them."

"Then you must have some theory as to this thing?"

"Of course the Water-Walker is a human being, but I can say no more. I do not know what invention he has by which he is enabled to walk thus, or who he is. He may be a saint or a sinner."

"Ain't it odd that he walked the very night that Josiah Winchester was killed?" Zeb asked.

"Not necessarily."

"D'ye want ter bet on it?"

"Understand me, Oakes. I say that it is not necessarily odd. He may even be Winchester's slayer, but the mere fact that you saw him the night of the murder goes for nothing, in itself. Other men were walking, that night."

"It's a mighty queer go."

"Granted?"

"O'Day says he's Old Nick, himself," Zeb persisted.

Bradstreet smiled.

"What have you got there, Oakes?"

"It's that feller's coat. He squirmed out on't, an' I kept it, hopin' it might prove evidence ag'in' him, some day."

"You did right."

"I'll find out where 'twas bought ef I go all over New York ter do it."

"Let me see it."

Zeb passed over the garment, and Bradstreet made a search of the pockets. At first he

thought there was nothing whatever of importance to be found, but more careful investigation finally brought up a crumpled bit of pasteboard. This did not promise much, but he took it to the nearest street lamp.

It proved to be a visiting card of the prevailing style, and a name was printed upon it.

"ALDEN WINCHESTER."

The detective read with surprise. What was the card of a wealthy New Yorker in a boatman's pocket for? Certainly, it would seem that Winchester would have no occasion to visit such a man.

"Perhaps he lost it on the street," thought Jacob; and then he turned the pasteboard over.

On the back side he saw several written words, and again he read with surprise:

"The key is for the front door. Make every effort to enter secretly. Once inside you know what to do!"

What a suggestive record! How certain events of the past flashed upon Steady Hand. He remembered the two men at the corner of Sands and Jay streets, and how one had given the other a key; he remembered Barnes's assertion that the giver of the key had been Alden Winchester; and he remembered the murder of Josiah Winchester.

"Once inside you know what to do!"

It was a significant sentence. What is vague may often be explained in a simple way, but we are prone to put the worst construction upon all that is suspicious. Careful as Jacob was not to form rash judgment, a wave of doubt went over him.

The tongue of suspicion had been turned against the Water-Walker; the men in the boat had appeared and, by accident or design, saved the Water-Walker; and now Winchester's card was found in the pocket of the coat.

It required no vivid imagination to see that there might be a connection between all these points. Did such a connection really exist?

"What does the card say?" asked Oakes, who had been wringing the water out of his garments.

"There is some scribbling on it, but the name of our man is missing," the Detective Napoleon answered, carelessly.

"I didn't expect the good luck to run him down."

"You'll never satisfy your grudge," observed Barnes.

"We'll see!"

"I don't suppose you took his photograph while you were wrestling in the water?"

"I know a man who run!" Zeb retorted.

"Not being a fool, I did run—or swam, rather."

"We may as well get back home," Jacob interrupted. "It would be idle to search for the Water-Walker, and the boat has disappeared. We'll go back on the bridge. Don't fear that you will lose on your boat, Zeb."

Mr. Oakes was not thinking half so much about his boat as about how he could get even with the destroyers, but he was willing to go home. They started, but did not cross by the bridge. Oakes lived near the river on the Brooklyn side, and the ferry furnished a more convenient means of travel. Accordingly, they all went together by that line.

Zeb was too wet to enter the cabin, and the others did not care to, so they stood outside. Barnes showed an inclination to renew his banter with Oakes, but Jacob stood somewhat apart in a thoughtful mood. While thus occupied he was approached by a deck-hand, who touched his sleeve.

"Excuse me, boss," said the man, "but maybe, I kin give you a useful tip."

"On what?"

"I hear you're on the Winchester murder case."

"How did you hear so?"

"Detective Truman Nettle and a friend o' his'n crossed on my boat, an' I heard him talk. I could hev give him a tip, but I wouldn't do it. Nettle is no good!"

"What is the tip?"

"They say Alden Winchester was at home the night his brother was killed."

"Who says so?"

"Nettle did. He said it in a casual way ter his pard, an' as t'other feller didn't dispute it, I s'pose it is accepted as a fact, ain't it?"

"So I suppose."

"It's gammon!"

"Indeed! Well, I shall be glad to hear what you know about it."

"Alden Winchester crossed on this here very blessed boat that night!"

"Are you sure?"

"Dead sure!"

"At what hour?"

"I can't say exactly, but it was prob'ly our first trip after twelve. He come from Brooklyn, an' went ter New York with us."

"Do you know him by sight?"

"Do I? Well, I should smile! I used ter work for him."

"Did you speak with him on the boat?"

"Not I. When I left his employ it was good-

by, John! He an' I couldn't agree, an' he give me the grand bounce. Of course he wouldn't have spoke ter me, anyhow, but he didn't see me. He came in all muffled up, waltzed inter the ladies' cabin, sat down, buried his chin in his collar, an' set there like a sore-headed bear."

"If he was muffled up, you may have been mistaken as to his identity."

"I was not—'twas Winchester, sure pop!"

"Why should he cross by the boat? The bridge would have been far more convenient, if he was going home at once."

"Mr. Bradstreet, there are queer things in this world of ours. You've p'inted the way fur an explanation by your remark. Of course the bulk of our boat-trade is business men who live, or work, nigh one side of the river. They hardly ever use the bridge, fur it would take 'em a good bit out o' their way. On t'other hand, the bridge is a heap more convenient fur some travelers, an' Alden is one on 'em. Wal, as you say, why should he use the ferry? Why, unless he thought there would be nobody here who would know him?"

There was momentary silence. The boat was approaching the Brooklyn slip, and, unless Bradstreet saw fit to remain on it, their conversation must soon end.

"You say that Winchester discharged you," Jacob finally added.

"He did."

"Do you bear him any ill-will?"

"Certain I do."

"Don't you know this injures your testimony?"

"Does it alter the facts?" retorted the man.

"No."

"I don't care a continental, anyhow. I've got a grudge against Winchester, but I wouldn't do him malicious mischief. Of course he had a right to discharge me, an' I wouldn't think o' kickin' up a fuss. I only thought, mebbe, you'd like ter know he was over ter Brooklyn that night. Here we be. So-long!"

The speaker moved along to the gates, and the chance to talk was ended, but he had left the detective food for thought. Jacob went home in a serious, meditative mood.

CHAPTER XVI.

OLD CY BRINGS A WITNESS.

THE following morning Mr. Truman Nettle was in the police-station. He was not in a happy frame of mind. He had been to the superintendent of police and asked for several detectives to aid him in catching Steve Ridlon. That official had asked for his reasons for supposing that Ridlon had been one of the men who killed Josiah Winchester, and, after a good deal of dodging, the detective had been compelled to confess that there was nothing more than that Ridlon had long been known as a house-breaker.

The superintendent had frankly stated that he did not see anything striking in that, and Ridlon's eagerness to avoid Nettle in New York was but natural.

When a man knows he is under espionage by the police, and is an old criminal, he is not prone to seek, or endure, an interview with them.

Despite this adverse opinion, concessions were made to Nettle, but with such ill-grace that the latter went away in an irritable mood. Going to the police-station, he laid his grievance before the captain, only to have that official remark that if he did not stir himself and look for more likely clues, he would find himself beaten out in the end.

All this made Nettle angry, and he was sitting at one side, glowering sulkily out of the window, when the door opened and two men entered. One was a stranger; the other was a person whose face had grown familiar to Nettle.

It was Clover Crookback.

The old man came in as boldly, and, withal, with an air as innocent as though Nettle had not plainly notified him that the august eye of the law, as personified by Nettle, was upon him. Instead of cowering, his face brightened at sight of the detective, and he advanced quickly.

"I wanted fer ter see ye, cap'n," he deferentially announced.

"Well, you do see me, don't you?" growled Nettle.

"Thet fack is my pleasure, sir, an' I wish ter call your attention—"

"None of your agricultural book nonsense, now!"

"That ain't it, sir, but ye see that man?"

Old Cy pointed to his companion.

"I'm not blind," sourly responded the detective.

"I'm glad you ain't, fur it's a painful affliction. I had a cousin who couldn't sleep nights on account on't. It kep' him awake with its ache, the blindness did, until he got chronic sonmambulism."

"Insomnia," suggested the police captain.

"The two words mean the same," serenely responded Crookback, "though I thank ye fur the hint. But that ain't ter the p'int. This man who is with me, Mr. Nettle, was present ter the fire."

"Ah!" croaked Nettle, wisely.

"Yes, sir."

"Did he learn as much as you?" asked Truman, severely.

"More, I should say."

"Is he a friend of yours?"

"No."

"Then why did you come here with him?"

"I want ter help ye, cap'n," asserted the old man, in his most earnest way. "The law makes demands on ter the whole on us, an' we've got ter git under the flag; an' then, ag'in, ef I kin help ye ketch them p'ison snakes, I'd like ter do it."

Nettle gazed in silence at Mr. Crookback. He had no faith in the peddler, and suspected that some trap had been laid for his feet.

"I was there," the stranger finally put in, impatiently.

"At the fire, eh?"

"Yes."

"What did you see?"

"I think the front door was unlocked at the start."

"It has been stated that the first on the scene entered by the window."

"So they did, and I was one of them. I hustled right around to the door to unlock it, but, when I got there, it was not locked. No key being visible, I pulled on the knob, and it opened right away, without trouble."

"Perhaps somebody else had been ahead of you."

"Not of the party who entered."

"Wasn't the door tried from the outside, at the start?"

"Yes."

"And found locked?"

"Locked or bolted."

"You will have to explain."

"I think," announced the stranger, "that the guilty parties were even then in the building!"

"No!" Nettle exclaimed.

"I say, yes."

"What ground have you for such a belief?"

"One thing I find suggestive was the condition of the door. I think some one turned a key, or slid a bolt, while we were entering by the window. Again, after we got in, and were hustling around in the smoke, I run plum' up against some one who at once struck out at my head, uttering an imprecation. He missed, and then commanded that I let him go—"

"Had you seized him?"

"No; and that is what perplexes me. I had made no movement toward touching him. He called out, 'Let me go!' without any cause whatever."

"Suspicious, very!" declared Nettle.

"So I think."

"What kind of a looking man was he?"

"Tall and strongly built, with a tremendous waist upon him—"

"Like the man seen at the corner of Sands and Jay streets," put in the police captain. "There may be something in that. Did you see his face?"

"Only vaguely. It was a dark, ill-looking face, with a stubby mustache—"

"Ridlon!" Nettle exclaimed.

"Ridlon has no 'tremendous waist.'"

"He could be disguised."

"Possibly he wore the big waist as a mask to his face," the captain suggested, with perceptible sarcasm.

"You will pardon me, sir," severely responded Nettle, "but your levity comes at a very untimely stage of affairs. What this worthy man has stated is of the highest importance, and, in my opinion, serves to connect Ridlon positively with the case. Ridlon has a stubby mustache. Proceed, my good sir, I will protect you!"

This patronizing promise brought a brief smile to the captain's face. He was not aware that the witness had needed any "protection," and Truman's flight of eloquence amused him.

The witness, however, had told all he knew.

"I can't add any more except that the idea has been growing in my mind that we caught the murderers right in the house, and that it was one of them that I ran against."

"Looks proper likely," asserted Clover Crookback.

"How did you happen to come here with this man?"

Nettle put the question to the witness, and pointed to Old Cy, but it was the latter who answered glibly:

"I went ter sell him my great book, Aaron Watts's Agricultural hymns, an' he said he was at the fire, an' I said I was there, an' he give his testimony; an' I said ter him he must come right here an' tell you all about it. I'm interested in the case, Truman, an' will help ye find them tarnal critters. Jestice must be done, an' I'll back ye up. Yes, sirree, sir; Old Cy is with ye!"

Nettle regarded Crookback with great uncertainty. Was he to be trusted or suspected? Nettle was at fault. One moment he was inclined to abandon his former doubts; the next he was more suspicious than ever. Old Cy puzzled him.

"You talk well," he observed, dubiously.

"I'm a good 'eal of a doer, too."

"You seem to have regarded this gentleman's story as important. Why?"

"Every little helps. We now hev it pooty-

straight that one o' the critters was a man with a stubby mustache, an' we hev only ter find him."

"How about your friend, Ridlon?"

"He ain't no friend o' mine!" Cy asserted.

Nettle meditated, looked hard at Crookback, and then suddenly directed:

"Let me see your book."

"I will," Cy agreed, glibly. "You will find it a prime article in the way o' agricultural facks, most o' which is true. It shows how ter raise corn an' onions without supernatural horse-phates, an' how ter rake hay while ye set in the house—"

He had handed over the soiled volume with the celerity of a professional book-agent, and Truman had read the title. The latter now interrupted:

"You have referred to this book by a variety of titles, never giving the same one twice, but I now find that none which you did give was correct. The right title seems to be 'Arithmetic of Practical Agriculture.' Don't you know the name of the book you sell?"

"I ain't never read the title," returned Crookback, with all the ease and readiness imaginable, "an' it don't seem ter make no great difference, anyhow. As long as the facks are in the book, an' a readin' on't will bring an ignorant city man out o' his lost an' undone condition, what does it matter what the name is?"

The old man beamed upon Nettle as benevolently as was possible, and appeared to be wholly without guile.

"I don't know what to make of you," Truman admitted.

"Eh?"

"Do you remember what was said about your antics at the fire?"

"It was libel," Old Cy calmly returned.

"What did you mean by 'So he has been here?'"

"Didn't mean nothin', fur I didn't say it."

"How about the charge that you did?"

"'Twas a mistake."

Crookback still spoke readily, but without perceptible emotion. If he had been maligned, he did not feel angry, nor particularly hurt.

Nettle shook his head.

"Well, old man, I am not your judge. I hope you are only a harmless peddler of books, but you know best. Well, sir," to the stranger, "I am very much obliged for your testimony, though I do not see in what way I can make it very valuable. You can leave your name and address, and go."

"That's right," agreed Crookback; "take down all the facks, Truman, an' ef I hear o' any more, I'll call around. I want them critters ter be ketched—I do, by Cain!"

CHAPTER XVII.

A FERRY-BOAT ADVENTURE.

THE ferry-boat was leaving the foot of Fulton street, Brooklyn, bound for New York. There was the jingling of bells, and then the craft slowly receded from the slip and started out into the noble river which, for an unknown number of years, has poured its waters oceanward between Long and Manhattan Islands, and which had seen with superb indifference the great bridge, the wonder of modern times to the human race, suspended over it, never varying a ripple because of the mechanical structure which threw a shadow on its surface.

As usual, most of the passengers went to the cabin, but one young lady remained at the stern and, leaning on the rail, looked thoughtfully down toward the water.

This was Leobelle Blake. Business was taking her across the river, but her thoughts were on other subjects. She was thinking about the mystery which hung over her father's life. Had he, really, been Josiah Winchester? If so, what had been his object in keeping the marriage secret?

When he married he was a man of middle age, and, if he and Winchester had been one and the same person, there had been no one to please except himself. He was a wealthy man with a fortune in his own hands.

If he had cared enough for Leobelle's mother to marry her, why had he concealed the fact of the marriage from the world? The suggestion of pride would not seem to explain it, though the wife, as plain Hannah Wise, had been poor and humble—Josiah Winchester had avoided society, lived almost as a recluse, and evinced a strong contempt for his kind. It was not pride which had led to his course.

That he had a reason was manifest, and certain doubts were in Leobelle's mind which troubled her. Had there been a legal marriage? As far as the ceremony and the minister was concerned there could be no doubt, but in regard to her father she was not so sure.

If he had been unprincipled enough to neglect and desert his family at Flushing, might there not be some other family that had been used the same?

Since these possibilities and fears entered Leobelle's mind she had been in an unhappy state. She had had but little to say when her mother and James talked, but she had done a good deal of thinking.

Her nature was one of the sensitive kind, and

she had been brooding over known and possible troubles until she was miserable in the extreme.

Such was the situation when she stood on the boat and looked over the rail at the restless water below. Finally, this scene began to have an adverse effect on her. The water appeared to depart from its usual form and motion, and to swim dizzily. It was a condition experienced by others before her, but she lacked the will to break off the influence. She felt drawn toward the curling surface, and she leaned far over the rail.

Suddenly she felt herself slipping. The damp surface of the boat proved poor support for her feet in her present position, and she began to fall. She made a sudden start brought about by alarm, but something else occurred to stand between her and danger.

A strong arm was thrown around her and she was drawn back to a safe position. For an instant the scene swam before her vision; then the unnatural influence passed and she was herself again.

She found herself facing an elderly gentleman who was regarding her with an air of grave concern. She did not find words readily, and it was he who broke the silence.

"I am afraid you are careless, young lady," he observed; but the critical way in which he looked at her suggested that he was not sure what had been the trouble.

"I was dizzy," he answered.

"Oh! was that it?"

"Yes; I had been looking into the water until my head whirled, and I lost control of my actions. I am sincerely ashamed of my weakness. Sir, I owe my life to you; I should have fallen only for your timely aid."

"You were in danger."

"I was; I realize it fully; and I thank you most heartily. My heavens! I do not know why I was so helpless—it was as though I was charmed by a serpent and drawn to peril, to death! You have saved my life; I thank you very much!"

She spoke tremulously, and put out her hand, but he did not seem to see it. He raised his hat courteously.

"I am glad to have helped you," he returned.

"I cannot fully realize the danger, even now, my experience was so strange. Suffice it to say that I should have fallen only for you. I am very grateful."

"Pray don't mention it."

"My brother will thank you more formally."

"I am sufficiently thanked now."

There was something like impatience in his voice, but she did not notice it.

"At least," she added, "you will give me your name and address?"

He started perceptibly.

"It is not necessary."

"Pardon me," Leobelle returned, "if I have asked too much, but I thought my brother would know better what to say in the case than I."

"My dear young lady, you over-estimate my services. I am three times as old as you, and have had three times as much experience, at least. During my day I have seen other people obliged. New York is like a menagerie of wild animals, with most of the animals on their good behavior. We rush to and fro in our mad American way; danger occurs to some; others reach out a friendly hand to help them. This life, as far as our great city is concerned, is a mad scramble. If, in the scramble, any one of us helps another, it is the rule for both parties to forget the service in short order—"

"That is not my way!" Leobelle quickly interrupted.

"Then you have not imbibed the cosmopolitan spirit. You must do it, if you wish to be like your fellow-beings. Here we are at the New York slip, however, and we can argue the point no further. Shall I see you ashore in safety?"

Leobelle regarded the elderly gentleman as a very odd character, but his looks, his dress, and his manner were alike those of a gentleman.

Odd as he seemed, his courtesy did not fail, and there had been nothing to chill her gratitude.

"Thank you," she answered; "I will accept your offer with pleasure."

The boat was nearing the drop, and they passed through the ladies' cabin, and stood with the crowd. No one except the elderly gentleman had observed Leobelle's danger and narrow escape, and there were no curious eyes fixed upon them.

Leobelle was one of those persons who are not so common as they ought to be—persons who are capable of appreciating a favor at its worth, and of feeling corresponding gratitude. Having this feeling toward her new acquaintance, she tried to be sociable while the boat was being secured, but he answered in monosyllables, and looked at the whirling wheel as it spun around and made them fast, as though he thought that every-day sight was more attractive than Leobelle's fair face.

They left the boat and started through the ferry-house, but had gone only a few steps,

when James Blake appeared in front of his sister.

"So you've come, Leobelle," he saluted. "I had begun to think—"

He stopped short, fixed his gaze upon the elderly man's face, and stared in open-eyed surprise. That gentleman had made a prompt movement to leave without the ceremony of leave-taking, but Leobelle's voice arrested him.

"James, I want to introduce you to this gentleman," the young lady explained. "He has done me a great service, and I wish you would thank him properly. I am afraid I am not capable of it. Sir, this is my brother, Mr. Blake. James, this is Mr.—"

The elderly man's fixed, unpromising expression had embarrassed Miss Blake, and she stammered over the introduction, felt and acted awkward, and then came to a full stop for want of the stranger's name.

He lifted his hat with grim politeness.

"Smith," he coolly remarked, and then without another word, turned and walked rapidly away toward the street.

Leobelle and James both watched him closely, but while her gaze was one of profound wonder, the young man's face soon flushed.

"The scoundrel!" he muttered, angrily.

"I think it is only eccentricity," answered Leobelle, doubtfully. "He was kind to me—"

"Curse him!" uttered James, hotly.

"Why—what do you mean?"

"Was he polite to you? Did he try to win your good opinion?"

"Indeed he did not, as far as his manner was concerned. On the contrary, he was from the first as curt and strange as you saw him. But, James, he did more. I nearly fell from the boat, and it was his arm that seized and drew me back. Only for him I should have fallen into the river, perhaps to death."

"That's odd!" James muttered.

"I was dizzy—"

"I mean that it was strange he should save you."

"What do you mean?"

"Leobelle, do you know him?"

"No."

"Can you surmise who he was?"

"Indeed, I cannot."

"It was Alden Winchester!"

"Alden Winchester!"

"The same. Shall I say 'our worthy uncle?'"

"How strange that I should meet him!"

"Say, rather, how lucky that you met me!"

"But I am sure he meant me no harm."

"You don't know him. He had done you a real or fancied service, and I know you well enough to be sure that you were grateful. You are not so well informed in the ways of the world as you might be, and I say again that it was fortunate I met you here. I believe all of our family troubles have been due to him, and that he meant you harm now!"

CHAPTER XVIII.

THE DECLARATION OF WAR.

JAMES spoke with an excited, angry manner, and his clinched hand showed the state of his feelings toward Alden Winchester, but Leobelle was not so ready to think evil of him. If he had wished harm to overtake her, why had he saved her?

"I wish," James added, "that I had chastised him on the spot!"

"That would have been unjust," remonstrated the girl.

"I tell you that he must keep away from you."

"But I am sure he meant me no harm."

"And I am sure he did. If we can prove that Josiah Winchester was our father we shall step between Alden and all the dead man's money. If he can get us out of the way, one by one, all obstacles will soon be removed. He had the chance with you, but my sudden appearance alarmed him and he fled. If he could have got you away, you would not have been seen again. Possibly he would have slain you outright; more likely, he would have made you prisoner. In any case, he would have made sure you were out of his way!"

"I don't agree with you, James!" Leobelle declared.

"You don't know the world as I do."

"Why did he save me from falling into the river, if he wanted me out of his way?"

"Perhaps he did not recognize you until after you were saved."

"If he wanted to get me away, and shut me up, why did he speak curtly to me, and refuse my friendly advances?"

James shook his head.

"He's a deep one, and we can't tell just how he did intend to proceed."

"I don't see how he could accomplish his object by trying to get rid of me, and that's just what he did try to do," persisted Leobelle.

"All right; have it as you will!" retorted James, out of temper. "I haven't another word to say on the subject; henceforth I shall confine my work to actions, not words. One thing I will say to you, however—look out for Alden Winchester!"

"I will 'look out' for myself," Leobelle amended.

"Very well. And now let us attend to business."

They went to do the errand which had brought Leobelle to New York—a matter not of importance except to themselves—and then James escorted his sister back to the ferry. She had expected him to return to Brooklyn, but he pleaded an engagement and left her at the ferry-house.

When once more alone his face assumed a hard, business look. While with Leobelle he had found it difficult to keep his thoughts from straying to such a degree as to betray him. He could not think of the trivial errand of the day; his mind was all the time upon another subject, and he had reached a decision before parting with Leobelle.

After leaving her he walked rapidly away, and was soon in a car of the Elevated Road and bound up-town. He rode as far as Forty-second street, and then alighted and turned into an adjacent street. There his pace slackened for a few moments.

"Am I doing wisely?" he muttered. "It would be a bad slip if I ruined all by precipitation—but I think I am right."

Starting quickly along again, he reached a handsome brown-stone house. The door-plate bore the name of "Alden Winchester" in pretentious letters. He rung the bell peremptorily, and a servant appeared.

"Is Mr. Winchester in?" he asked.

"Yes, sir."

James crossed the threshold.

"Say to him that I wish to see him."

"What is the name, sir?"

"I will give it to him."

The caller was wasting no courtesy upon the servant, and she looked at him doubtfully, but the appearance of Winchester, himself, helped her out of her dilemma. The master of the house was accompanied by his youngest son, and looked like a model family man.

He started at sight of James, and, plainly recognized him at once.

"A gentleman to see you, sir," the servant announced.

"Yes," Blake added.

"What can I do for you?" inquired Winchester coldly.

"I wish to see you in private—if you please."

The last words came ungraciously, and did not impress the elder gentleman favorably. Probably James would not have received much attention if he had been unknown, but Winchester opened the parlor door and silently motioned him to enter. Blake obeyed; Winchester followed him and closed the door. Another motion toward a chair gave a fresh cue, and both sat down.

"Very well?" began Winchester, inquiringly.

"I presume you know why I am here," returned James.

The master of the house raised his brows in surprise.

"I? Certainly not!" he made reply.

"It is usual for relatives to call upon each other."

"What has that to do with this case?"

"I claim you as a relative!"

"This is news to me."

"You had a brother, Josiah, lately deceased."

"True."

"I am his son!"

The announcement was made, and James watched eagerly to see the result. He hoped to see a start of alarm, or an expression of dismay, but saw only surprise of a very well-restrained kind.

"Pardon me, but I think that I do not understand," Alden answered.

"Josiah Winchester was my father."

"Young man," sternly returned Winchester, "I have only to remind you that my unfortunate brother was a bachelor, and you will see that you insult his memory grievously!"

"Are you sure he was a bachelor?"

"Certainly."

"I don't believe you!"

The blunt announcement brought a flush to Alden Winchester's face.

"I am not in the habit of being insulted in my own house," he replied, with severe dignity, "but I will not condemn any man unheard. Perhaps you will explain your extraordinary claims?"

"I will; that's what I'm here for. Over twenty years ago Josiah Winchester married my mother, Hannah Wise, and I am one of the children of that union!"

"Are you aware that I have always lived near my late brother?"

"Very likely."

"I say he was never married."

"We shall prove otherwise."

"If what you say is true, where have you been all this while?"

"In Flushing. Your brother took the name of Thomas Blake when he married, and always concealed his true name from his family. It was not until after his murder that we learned the facts."

"And you claim that Josiah Winchester was, really, your father, Thomas Blake?"

"Exactly."

"What is your object?"

"To get justice."

"What do you call justice?"

"Recognition by the world of our just claims, and—our rights as his heirs."

"Ah! your object begins to appear."

"I expected you to call me a blackmailer," returned James, doggedly, "but you may as well forbear. I ask nothing until our claims are established; I make no claims until we prove all that we assert. I don't think that you can make me out a blackmailer on that."

Winchester's expression seemed to soften.

"Are you not aware, young man," he asked, "that all Brooklyn knows that my brother was a bachelor?"

"I know that they think so."

"I know it!"

"How?"

"Haven't I ought to know about my own brother?"

"Not if he deceived you as he did every one else."

"That is next to impossible."

"So I think."

The reply was significant, and Winchester knit his brows thoughtfully.

"What am I to understand by that?" he asked.

"I believe that you knew of your brother's marriage!"

"Indeed, I knew nothing of the kind. I sincerely believe that he was never married."

"Do you mean to fight us?"

"Fight you?"

"Yes. Understand me! It will do no good to beat around the bush, and I will say at the start that I think you have been knowing to the marriage. Some unworthy motive kept my father from acknowledging the marriage. It took place in Brooklyn, and my father called himself Thomas Blake. He took his young wife to Flushing, and there his family was reared, but he was away a great deal. There is every evidence that he led a double life. He never cared for any of us, though my mother and my sister are the noblest of women; and, some two years ago, he deserted us entirely. We then removed to Brooklyn, but gained no clue to his identity until after his death."

James then told how his mother had seen the picture on the fakir's easel, and to what conclusions it had led.

Winchester listened attentively, but shook his head gravely when the visitor finished.

"You are cherishing a delusive hope, young man," he answered, with real, or assumed, kindness. "I appreciate your position, and wish you well, but you are wrong. My brother was never married, and the picture deceived your mother and yourself."

"Don't I know my own father's picture?"

"Did you never see two men who looked strangely alike, without any good reason save chance? All of us have. How easy, then, to be deceived in regard to a picture. For your own sake, I caution you not to cherish hopes that must end in disappointment."

"No doubt they will end thus if you can control the future," James retorted. "We'll see how it'll end. For the last time, do you refuse to admit my claim?"

CHAPTER XIX.

OLD CY WANTS TO BE A DETECTIVE.

THE interview did not hold out much promise; the two men seemed to be hopelessly apart in their aims and purposes. If a disinterested third person had seen and heard what was visible and audible, his sympathies would surely have gone out to the elder man. Winchester maintained a dignified, gentlemanly, even kind bearing, while James was not doing himself justice.

He was a well-meaning young man, with considerable of the gentleman in his nature, but he had an antipathy to the rich classes, and the belief that Alden Winchester had greatly and deliberately wronged him, his mother and his sister, led him to assume a defiant, aggressive air which lacked both dignity and force.

The tactics of the bully are never impressive.

To the last question the master of the house firmly made reply:

"I certainly shall not admit your claim until I know that it rests on firm foundation, and I advise you to investigate well before you make it public. If you had known my unfortunate brother well, you would not now make this claim, anyhow. He was a confirmed bachelor, a hermit—"

"How often did you see him?" James interrupted.

"On an average, once a week."

"How do you know where he spent his spare time?"

"He was always at his home."

"You show your hand plainly."

"How so?"

"You have always known of the marriage!"

"Sir?"

"The positive way in which you speak betrays you. If you knew so much about your brother's affairs, you must have known of the marriage. At the very start Josiah Winchester had some strong reason for not making the marriage public. He was of middle age, and ought to have been his own master. His parents were

dead, and what property he had, was his absolutely. He was not a proud man; he did not mix in fashionable circles. What earthly reason could he have for hiding his marriage with a woman for whom he had enough affection to marry?—what reason, unless there was a power behind the throne?"

"Proceed, young man!" Winchester directed, with a wave of his hand.

"I think that you were the evil genius!"

"You flatter me!" was the sarcastic reply.

"Do you deny it?"

"I do."

"Then, what was the hidden motive?"

"There was none. I give you my word of honor that I speak the truth when I say that my brother was never married. I am very sorry that you should have got this idea, for it can end only in disappointment. Consider how fragile your claim is! You have absolutely no proof except the evidence of the picture."

"I think that enough."

"I do not. As I have before pointed out, resemblances are common, and, when we come to pictures, we cannot be sure. Mr. Blake, you have my sympathy and good will, but you have been deceived by a chance resemblance, and your investigation will end only in disappointment. Better look elsewhere for your missing father."

This advice was given with an air of kindness, but it did not impress James favorably.

"I now know where you stand," he answered, intemperately.

"Beg pardon?"

"As my enemy!"

"Young man, you wrong me—"

"Tell that to the marines!"

Winchester's face flushed at this brusque retort, but his voice was still quiet and even as he answered:

"If you are determined not to believe me, I do not see that we need talk further."

"Nor I."

James arose, and bent an unfriendly look upon the master of the house.

"I need scarcely say that it is to be war between us from this time," he added; "but I want you to understand me. There is a good deal of blackmailing done in New York, but no stretch of fancy can place me in that list. Bear in mind that I have not asked you for a dollar, and hear me now when I declare I would not, under any condition, accept one penny from you. All we ask is justice, and, if we do not succeed in proving that Thomas Blake was, really, Josiah Winchester, we do not expect, and would not take, one cent of his property. We know, however, that we are right, and we shall press the matter to the end. Having learned by this interview that you are my enemy, I shall know just how to proceed."

The speaker had been moving toward the hall-door, where he paused.

"Young sir," gravely replied Winchester, "the time may come when you will see that you have wronged me to-day."

"Prove it!"

"How can I?"

"By admitting the truth of my claim."

"Before Heaven, I do not believe you can prove it, yourself!"

Blake knit his brows thoughtfully.

"Have you planned a scheme which will baffle us?" he slowly asked.

Again Winchester flushed.

"Enough!" he responded, somewhat haughtily. "Further talk between us is useless."

"I agree with you. Good-day!"

James opened the door and went out. Winchester followed him to the hall, but neither spoke further. James did not look around again, but unclosed the outer door and left the house. Down the high stoop he went, and along the street toward Sixth avenue. Mingled with his anger and disappointment was another feeling. He drew a deep breath and muttered:

"It is a relief to get away. The air of that house is one of hypocrisy, greed and rascality. I know Alden Winchester as he is. He shall know me as I am. He wishes to add Josiah Winchester's property to his already large possessions, but there will be no difficulty in proving my claim. I will wrest the property away from the man whom I cannot call 'uncle' without disgrace to myself!"

The following morning Alden Winchester and Truman Nettle were sitting in the saloon, in Brooklyn, to which he accompanied Jacob Bradstreet on a former occasion.

They had been discussing the recent tragedy, and Nettle had talked briskly, advanced certain theories with a very wise air, and looked more mysterious than the Sphinx, but it was noticeable that he had said absolutely nothing that was of importance.

As usual, he was all theory, and his theories did not go below the surface.

A lull in the conversation was followed by the entrance of a man whom Nettle saw with ill-concealed vexation. The new-comer was Clover Crookback, and the old man had established the habit of appearing so inopportunely that the detective had come almost to hate him.

Old Cy, however, did not appear to share this

feeling, and he advanced toward them with his little eyes twinkling with satisfaction.

"I'm right glad fur ter see ye, gents!" he declared. "You are jest the parties I wanted ter see."

"We are busy now—"

Nettle began rudely, but Crookback interrupted as cheerfully as though he was with his best friends.

"So be it! I must say that biz is pickin' up. I sold two copies o' Smithkins's Elements o' Agriculture last night, an' I got a recommend from another man. He says that he didn't know a carrot from a terbarker-plant a year ago, but he took ter studyin' my unrivaled book, an' now he's got so full o' rural facks an' information that he can set here in Brooklyn an' manage a farm up in Herkimer county. He bought it on the strength o' my book, an' though he ain't never seen it, he's got all sorts o' vegetables growin' there, an' is a practical farmer. It's improved his health a good 'eal. My book did it, an' it's the darnedest best book I ever seen, an' only five dollars a copy!"

"For Heaven's sake, let up!" Nettle requested.

"Eh?"

"Do you go by machinery?"

"I go by these legs, an' a fine pair they are!"

Old Cy gravely pointed to his lower limbs.

"Better than your back, old man. You carry a load there which, I should think, would tire you out."

"D'ye know who put it thar?"

"I thought, perhaps, you carried your books there."

"My infirmities are my own, same as your original sin is," Cy retorted. "Don't give me no more o' yer sass. I'm afeerd you was badly brung up. I hate a sassy person, an' don't think they're any good in this world, only as a spot where other folks kin put their spare disgust."

Here Crookback turned to Winchester.

"This ain't ter the p'int. I'm here ter see you, mister; or, at least, bein' here, I want ter see you."

"Can I help you?"

"You kin."

"How?"

"Give me a job. Peddlin' books is all wal enough in its way, an' it's sartainly a high-toned callin', only when you git kicked downstairs an' fall low; but I hev a bankerin' fur fame. I want ter be a detective!"

"You had better apply to Mr. Nettle."

"I want ter be your private detective. Jest let me tackle the job o' findin' the doers o' the Concord street deed. I'm gittin' new points, daily."

"What have you learned?"

Winchester asked the question with interest, not noticing the scornful curl of Nettle's lips.

"I met a milkman, a little while ago," Clover explained, "an', as I thought it would help him ter select better milk ef he knowed about agriculture, I offered ter sell him one o' my books. This led ter a general conversation, an' he made revelations about the murder of a highly important nature."

CHAPTER XX.

DEVELOPMENTS INCREASE.

OLD Cy's confident manner had due effect upon Winchester, but Nettle had heard such promises before from the seedy book-agent, and did not place much faith in him or his promised revelation.

"What did the milkman say?" Winchester inquired.

"He said," Crookback explained, "that, a few mornin's afore the fire, he was goin' his rounds, an', when he came ter Josiah Winchester's house, a man came out o' the basement door. The man never looked at him, but made off in a hurry."

The speaker paused and nodded emphatically to Alden, as though he had made a great revelation.

"What was the man doing when he saw him?"

"Comin' out."

"Out of the house?"

"No; out from under the stoop."

"Was the basement door open?"

"The milkman did not see as 'twas."

"Then what is the significant point about your statement?"

"What was the man doin' there, at that hour?"

"True, there is something in that. Or perhaps the man was my brother's servant?"

"He wa'n't. 'Twas a stranger; a man with a stubbly mustache—"

"Ah! like Steve Ridlon!" Nettle exclaimed.

"True," Winchester admitted.

"You see the p'int now," continued Old Cy, with an air of pride. "No honest man would be skulkin' around there like that 'way before sun-up. That chap come there with an evil scheme inter his mind, an' I don't doubt that he was the spy o' them who killed your honored brother. Ef you know sech a man, you hev only ter arrest him. I take some pooty considerable credit ter myself fur findin' all this out."

"You shall be rewarded, if it proves important."

"Oh! it is—no doubt on't!"

"I hope so."

"Now, I'd like ter be your detective an' ketch the critters!" Crookback avowed.

"If you can do so you shall be well paid."

"Will you commission me?"

"I have no such authority," answered Winchester, smiling at the old man's eagerness. "You can work on your own hook—or, perhaps Mr. Nettle will take you."

"Not I," declared Truman, all his doubts of Cy's sincerity returning. "Crookback would shift the load on his back upon me, and dump himself on with it."

Cy darted him a menacing look.

"The Lord shall cut off the scoffer in the midst of his sins," he declared. "Look out, mister, that I don't take a hand, too. I could thrash you without turnin' a hair, an' I may set out ter do it. Poke no fun at my hump, or I may poke you in the stomach, by Cain!"

The agriculturist doubled up one fist and felt of it with the other hand in a spirit of investigation.

"It's a wonderful bit o' bone an' muskle," he added, "an' I rec'lly s'pose I could punch it right clean through a soft head. Don't tempt me ter hit you, mister!"

Winchester interfered as a peacemaker. He did not know whether Crookback was dangerous or not, but he did not want any trouble there. He soothed the old man and hinted to Nettle that he had said enough in the way of banter. Conversation turned upon more practical matters, and it was agreed that the milkman's testimony furnished more evidence against Steve Ridlon.

If the skulker of the early morning had not been he, it was some one very much like him.

Nettle was encouraged in his determination to investigate that notorious criminal.

After a while Nettle and Winchester arose and took their departure. Crookback went out, too, but he was not allowed to accompany them far. They got rid of him on the corner and went their way.

They had barely left the saloon when the German proprietor walked over to a man in sailor costume who had sat reading a paper near at hand while they talked. The German's ponderous frame shook with laughter.

"Vot you dakes?" he inquired.

"I don't care to drink," the sailor answered.

"It vas too goot to be a dry joke, and there must be sometings daken. Those fellows never suspect you vas Shacob Bradstreet, and they gives away mit themselves all their secrets."

"No great secret, for they never had one," was the contemptuous reply. "Nettle is as full of mystery as he can hold, but he never had an idea worth ten cents on the dollar. I'm glad to know he's still on a certain scent, however."

"You don't think it vas der right one?"

"I know it is not."

"Nettle vas a mule, but der joke is that he never knew you vas his rival, and he talk as freely mit your ears around as though his ears filled der whole room. Der joke vas not a dry one. V'at you dake?"

"Give me a thimbleful of mixed ale, if you will have it so."

"All right; you take der small dose, and I dakes a couple of 'schooners.' Der joke was not a dry one!"

Shaking with laughter, the worthy German drew the ale, and when Bradstreet—for the sailor was, indeed, he—had emptied his small glass, he went out.

The recent conversation did not interest him as much as it did the saloon-keeper. He felt a supreme indifference for Nettle, and was willing he should hammer away at the case as long as he wished, while matters ran as they did.

In going down Fulton street Steady Hand stopped to buy a cigar. When he had lighted it he took from his pocket a note which he carefully read. It was expressed as follows:

"MR. BRADSTREET:—If you don't believe that Alden Winchester was in Brooklyn, the night of the murder, call upon Peter Cannon, No. — Fulton street, and oblige the deck-hand of

"FULTON FERRY."

The detective committed the name and the street-number to mind, and then slipped one end of the note into the flame of the cigar-lighter. The slip of paper burned to a crisp, and then he crumbled the skeleton and made sure that no word could be distinguished.

Leaving the cigar store he walked on until he reached the number which had been given. It proved to be a shoemaker's shop, and he entered. A coarse-featured, but honest-looking man sat on the second of two benches.

"Is the boss in?" Jacob asked.

"No, sor; he's out," was the reply.

"Is his name Peter Cannon?"

"No, sor; that's my name."

"Ah! You have a friend on the ferry-boat, I believe?"

"I have, that."

"He thinks you can give me some pointers on a subject in which I am interested—in brief, about one Alden Winchester."

A shade of suspicion went over the shoemaker's face, but he looked critically at Bradstreet's sailor garments and seemed to be reas-

sured. Jacob then and there decided that the deck-hand had not notified Cannon that any one was to be sent to him, and that, while the latter did not intend to talk freely to many on the subject, he did not think there was any harm in a sailor.

"You must 'a' just got in from a v'yage, or you'd know all about it."

"So I have; I've just got to port."

"Jim told yez about the murder, I s'pose?"

"Yes," replied Jacob, at a venture.

"I used ter work for Josiah Winchester when I was a young man."

"Did you?"

"Yes; an' I know him an' Alden well, or, at least, I did in old times."

"Why did you leave Josiah?"

"Got the sack."

"What for?"

"That's a long story."

"I like long stories, and I can spin a yarn myself, when I set out."

"Most sailors can," agreed the cobbler, as he hammered in one more nail and then cast off the foot-strap. "I can't make much ter interest ye, sor, out ave Josiah Winchester's case. The long an' short of it was, he was not the kind ave a slow-coach folks took him ter be, an' that's what led ter gettin' me sacked."

"I don't see how how that could be."

"I'll tell ye," promised the cobbler, after a moment's hesitation. "I don't want ter be mixed up in the case, an' niver a word would I say ef you wa'n't Jim's friend. I know it's all right, though, an' that you won't let it out."

"I can keep a secret as well as the next one," was the detective's non-committal response.

"Wal, then, I went ter work for Josiah when I was a young man, he having more ground then, an' keepin' three servants. Yes, he kep' us, but no great boodle did we git out of it."

"Didn't he pay you?"

"Yes, but talk about perquisites—bless you! ef anybody ever made an extra red out o' Josiah, I never heerd of it."

"He looked well to his property."

"I should say so. It took me two hours ter hire out ter him, an' all because he was bound ter beat me down on me price. Ef he'd had his way he'd hired a man fur his keep. Guess he'd tried it on with others, fur, though I wouldn't fall on me price, he finally hired me, though he sighed like a furnace when he said he'd give me the price I asked."

"Stingy, wasn't he?"

"I should smile. He was a caution, an' he changed cooks often; thought they all robbed him. He liked good grub, but he wanted it made so cheap that no cook could stand it. But that ain't ter the p'int; I set out ter tell ye why I left him. There was a mystery about him."

"What was it?"

"Wal, he used ter be away a good deal. He'd go an' stay about a week, an' then come back an' stay at home a week. His excuse was that business kep' him, but I had me suspicions. He was old enough ter be settled down, but I didn't think he was, an' I finally got onto the whole racket by hearin' him an' his brother talk."

CHAPTER XXI.

THE COBBLER DRIVES TWO KINDS OF NAILS.

THE detective began to be very much interested. So was the cobbler, in a different way. He was as eager to talk as a woman devoted to gossip, and, having started under the impression that it was safe, he did not try to curb himself.

"Alden Winchester used ter come over often from New York," Cannon continued, "but there was no great amount o' love between the brothers. I used ter think that ef Josiah hadn't been rich, they would never 'a' been tergether. He did not go ter see Alden, but I guess Alden had enough o' the Winchester love o' money ter want ter keep in the good graces o' his bachelor brother. Did I say bachelor?"

The cobbler broke into a chuckle, and quickly resumed:

"One day there was a sort o' quarrel between them—at least, Josiah was mad. I was outside in the back yard; they was in the back parlor, an' I didn't hear all they said. The first I knowed that anything was wrong Josiah's voice began to rise high an' sharp. I couldn't hear Alden's, so I knowed he was keepin' cool. I wa'n't above listenin', so I got around nigh the winder, an' this is what I heard. First, Alden's voice came in these words:

"Who is the woman?"

"I deny that there is a woman," says Josiah.

"Why do you persist in yer denial?" says Alden.

"Because it's so," says Josiah.

"You can no longer deceive me," says Alden.

"What is it ter you?" says Josiah.

"Remember that the honor o' the family is as much in your hands as mine!"

"Have I ever lowered it?"

"Are you married to that woman?"

"No."

"Am I to believe it?"

"I swear it!"

"I wish you were," says Alden. "I am not one ter stand out for differences in worldly po-

sition and wealth, an' I would receive any worthy wife you might bring, be she rich or poor. Remember that, and say once more whether you are married."

"I am not," says Josiah.

"Then you have dragged the Winchester honor low in the mud! This offense I cannot overlook."

"What right had you ter spy on me, an' my affairs?" says Josiah, as hot as you please.

"The discovery was due wholly to chance, an' I couldn't hardly believe that 'Thomas Blake' was my brother," says Alden. "I saw the woman, an' I must say she had an honest face. Does she know all that she should?"

"That will do!" says Josiah, sharply. "Don't let me hear another word. I have borne with you for brotherhood's sake, but I will endure no more. I never have interfered with your business; I will not allow you to interfere with mine. I forbid you ter say another word!"

"Then," continued the cobbler, "Alden began ter say something about the family honor, but I did not hear him finish. I seen Josiah get up, his face red with anger, an' march away inter the front parlor. Of course I heard no more after that."

"But didn't you hear more at some other time?" Bradstreet asked.

"No. The brothers was on the outs fur some time, an' I don't think they ever got on reel good terms ag'in; though, after sulkin' a bit, they eased off on their high horses, an' went ter visitin' ag'in."

"What do you infer from their talk?"

"You kin do yer own guessin'," replied the cobbler, with a wink.

"Do you think Josiah was married?"

"He said not; I never fully decided."

"From what Alden said, as you report it, I should infer that Josiah imposed upon some woman with a bogus marriage ceremony."

"Looks like it."

Steady Hand meditated. If Josiah had been "Thomas Blake," his marriage to Hannah Wise had been performed by a genuine clergyman, but there might be some circumstance which had rendered the union void.

In any case, it appeared that Josiah had been both crafty and dishonorable.

While the Detective Napoleon thought, his companion resumed work more briskly, but Bradstreet soon aroused and asked another question.

"When did you see Alden last?" he inquired.

"Only a little while ago. Of late years I ain't seen either very often, fur I left Josiah's ten year ago. He got awful cranky, an' one day my anger riz an' I twitted him with what I heard his brother say ter him. Great Scott! you'd ought ter seen how quick Josiah socked me. He gave me an hour ter git out, an' I beat his time by sev'ral minutes."

"And then your association with him ended?"

"Yes, but I seen him an' Alden now an' then. I see Alden last time only the night Josiah was killed."

"You did?"

"Yes."

"Where?"

"Here in Brooklyn."

"Tell me about it!"

"There ain't much to it. I had been over in New York, an' took the bridge home. It was gettin' toler'ble well along in the evenin', an' I wa'n't inclined ter feel much interest in t'other folks a-stirrin'; but, when I seen Alden right there in the same car with me, it sorter woke me up, an' brought back old times."

"Did you speak with him?"

"Nct I. Never a word hev we exchanged in the last five years."

"Did he notice you?"

"If he did he didn't let on. He sat there grim an' still, payin' no attention to his feller-passengers."

"You are sure it was he?"

"I kin swear to it!"

The confident reply served to put Alden Winchester in a very unfavorable light. That gentleman had plainly and unreservedly stated that he was not in Brooklyn the night of the Concord street tragedy.

"Did you see him leave the car?" Jacob continued.

"Yes. He went down the steps to the street jest ahead o' me."

"Where did he go then?"

"He turned ter the left an' walked through Sands street in a northerly direction."

Bradstreet was silent. Unless the cobbler was mistaken, which did not seem probable, evidence of a threatening nature was accumulating against Winchester. The course in which Cannon had seen him start would take him directly to the corner of Sands and Jay streets, where, according to Barnes's statement, he gave the key to the unknown, with which to enter some certain house.

Determined not to have an error enter into the investigation, if it was possible to bar it out, the detective closely questioned his companion in regard to the time when Winchester was seen to cross the bridge, and he learned that the hour was just such as to envelop the New Yorker more closely in the net.

Jacob was positive that Winchester had lied. He had been in Brooklyn that night of tragedy, and, in view of his stout denial, the revelation was a broad mark against him. Why should he say he was not there unless he had a guilty secret to conceal?

"Do you know," the Detective Napoleon finally made reply, "that what you have told me would go hard against Alden, if told in a court of law?"

"Very likely," the cobbler answered, "but I don't mean ter tell it there. Never a word hev I said about it except ter Jim, before, but as you are his friend, ave coorse it's all right."

"Suppose that something should occur to make you willing to go into the witness box, and tell your story in court, would you swear to all you've told me?"

"Of course I would, but why do ye ask sech a queer question?"

There was a trace of suspicion in the glance which Cannon bent upon his visitor.

"Oh! Jim felt sure that you were confident of all you've told me," Jacob responded, in an off-hand way which set Cannon's fears at rest.

"So I be, an' I'll swear to it!"

"Did you see Alden, that night, after he turned away and walked north on Sands street?"

"No."

"And this is all that you know about the case?"

"Yes."

The cobbler picked up another shoe, and Jacob skillfully changed the conversation. He had learned all that he could which was of interest, but it would not do to go away until subsequent conversation on minor subjects had removed any lingering suspicions in the cobbler's mind; so the detective spoke of the ocean, and, being fairly well informed on such subjects, he charmed Cannon with his eloquence, and made that gentleman wish that his life-calling was in the way of climbing tall masts, instead of sitting in a ten-by-twelve room and driving pegs into diseased shoes.

But while Jacob talked his thoughts strayed, and he was fitting in the new evidence.

"Josiah Winchester was a family man," he thought, "though whether he was legally married to Hannah Wise is not yet known to me. Alden knew of this so-called marriage, as Cannon's statement proves, though the New Yorker has not seen fit to admit the fact. Why does he fail to speak out and tell of it? Josiah was given to a greed for gold. Is it so with Alden? Is he so anxious to get his dead brother's money that he will see the widow and children want? Again, why does Alden lie and say he was not in Brooklyn that fatal night? If he don't mind he will, himself, build up a foundation for a serious charge against him. He don't look like a murderer, but—what was he doing that night?"

The detective finally arose.

"Well, shipmate, I'll be off now," he announced.

"Call in again, old man," invited the cobbler, heartily.

"Thank you; I probably shall."

Mr. Cannon did not suspect how much lay back of this answer, and he looked after Jacob in a friendly way.

"A hearty, harmless fellow!" he commented.

CHAPTER XXII.

JAMES IS ALARMED.

THE detective's course, after leaving the cobbler's shop, was toward home, but he had gone only a short distance when he was accosted by a young man. The latter's face was not unfamiliar; Steady Hand recognized him as Dudley Leland, the friend of James Blake, and the still warmer friend, it was thought, of Leobelle.

"Excuse me, sir," began Leland, politely, "but is this not Mr. Bradstreet, the detective?"

"My name is Bradstreet."

"And you are engaged upon the Concord street murder case?"

"Why do you think so?"

"I was told so by a detective named Nettle." Jacob gave Leland a sharp glance.

"Ah! Is Nettle a friend of yours?" he asked.

"Quite the contrary—or, at least, I know him only casually. I've known him by sight ever since I was a boy, but there is no real acquaintance. I don't know what you think of Nettle, but I doubt his ability."

This was said with an air of frankness, but Bradstreet remained non-committal.

"Indeed!" he replied.

"In a casual conversation to-day, he told me that you were representing the insurance company in the investigation of Josiah Winchester's death."

"I presume that you have a point. If so, I am ready to hear it."

"Jealousy seems common among the members of your profession," answered Leland, smiling. "Nettle showed that spirit, and I am afraid that you are not free from it."

"You are mistaken!" returned Bradstreet, quickly. "You may mean well, but your charge is nothing less than an insult to me. Nettle and I do not pull together; that fact I freely admit; and that is just why I should be a

fool to tell all I know to a man who admits having just come from him."

"I beg your pardon, sir," earnestly answered Leland. "I meant no offense; but if I have fallen into error, you have done the same. I presume you think that Nettle may have sent me to 'pump' you. Therein you err. My conversation with Nettle amounted to nothing, and, though I had something on my mind, I gave him no clew to it. I don't believe in the man."

The speaker's manner was frank and favorable, and Jacob did not offer further rebuff.

"Have you an interest in the case?" he asked.

"Decidedly, yes."

"May I ask what?"

"I think that you are a discreet man. Am I right?"

"Yes; but I warn you that all other things become subordinate to the chief object when I am on a case."

"I see. You will not promise to keep any secret which would work against your success."

"I would not."

"Suppose I could show you parties who will claim Josiah Winchester's property?"

"On what ground?"

"That they are next of kin."

"Alden Winchester is a brother."

"They are, respectively, a wife, a son and a daughter."

"To bachelor Winchester?"

"He was not a bachelor. He had a wife whom he married under an assumed name, and who was ignorant of his real name and identity until sight of his picture, since the murder, revealed the truth to her."

"Can she prove her marriage?"

"Yes."

"Has she taken any steps to do it?"

"Not yet, and it is on that point that your advice is desired. I have been talking with the wife and daughter—the son being absent temporarily—and we have decided that it might be well to lay their claims and their proof before Alden Winchester at once. If he is an honorable man he cannot disregard the evidence, and the case may possibly be settled without recourse to aggressive measures."

"Why do you consult me?"

"Because you are a detective—"

"Have you forgotten that there are lawyers?"

"Let me finish. I was about to add that, having been engaged upon the case, you have probably learned something about it; and, as we have nothing to conceal, we may be able to help you materially, and give you some theory, by telling all that we know."

"Have you a clew to the guilty persons?" Bradstreet quietly asked.

"None whatever."

"Or a theory?"

"No. Nettle says the murder was undoubtedly the work of burglars, but I am not so sure of that. I did think to give him some points, but his dogmatic manner discouraged me. We want no part of Nettle. Don't you think it possible," Leland abruptly added, "that somebody besides burglars did the deed?"

"What ground have you for thinking so?"

"None, really, but, somehow, I don't fall in with Nettle's theory."

"Why not?"

"I can give no logical reason, but the feeling is strong within me that there is more to the matter. I have asked myself what more there could be, but have gained no light. Very likely you will laugh at this explanation, but I am not a detective."

"Nor is Nettle," Jacob commented dryly.

"Well, can we have your advice in the case? Shall we go to see Alden Winchester?"

"My dear sir," the detective answered, "it is a matter which concerns you alone. I will remind you that, if you prove your claims, you will step between him and his brother's money. If he is an honorable man he will need no more than proof to admit your claims. On the other hand, if you show your hand too soon, he may, if so inclined, contrive some way to beat you. I cannot presume to advise you what to do, for I might find that my two cases would conflict before I reached the end."

Leland looked disappointed.

"We would reward you well, in case of success," he urged.

"I may be able to help you, without any reward. If I find that I can, I will do so. Although I cannot agree to enter your service, or take any active part in directing your efforts, I am inclined to give my sympathy to all just causes. If yours proves to be of that nature, you may count on my friendship."

"I thank you cordially," Leland returned.

"Of course, my interest is that of a friend to the wife and children of the late Mr. Winchester; I could not, if I would, claim any relationship."

"Unless it was one of future date."

"Sir?"

"Miss Leobelle Blake may show you the way to make out the relationship."

Dudley was surprised and did not find words readily, but Bradstreet smiled and resumed:

"I know you, and I know of the Blake

family. If you want to see me again, on any point, you can do so freely, for you see that I am conversant with the surface affairs of those whom you represent."

Jacob had been making a critical study of Mr. Dudley Leland, and the result was so favorable that he had decided to establish amicable relations with the young man. He might be useful in the future. A few more friendly words were said, and they were about to separate when quick steps were followed by the unexpected appearance of James Blake. The latter looked flushed and troubled.

"Dudley, where is Leobelle?" he demanded.

"Leobelle? Isn't she at home?"

"No. Isn't she with you?"

"No. I haven't seen her to-day."

"By heavens! she's in trouble, then!" James exclaimed, excitedly.

"How do you know?"

Leland's manner betrayed concern equal to Blake's, but it was mixed with a good deal of uncertainty.

"She is mysteriously absent—"

"Your mother said she had gone for a walk."

"So she had, but she has not returned. Listen! When I was returning home, an hour ago, I met a friend who declared that he had seen Leobelle in a cab, on Hamilton avenue, but I regarded the statement as an error. But Leobelle is missing!"

"Do you think she is in trouble?"

"I certainly do!" James declared.

"Have you just come from the house?"

"I was there half an hour ago."

"She may have returned."

"You don't look at this matter as I do, Dudley. I told you how Alden Winchester made her acquaintance on the ferry-boat, and I said, at the time, that he had some plot to decoy her away. Only my timely appearance failed him. All this is in keeping with my fears, and I tell you that he has abducted her!"

Leland looked troubled and uncertain, but did not appear inclined to take such a radical view of the case.

"What are we to do?" Blake added.

"I cannot imagine why Leobelle should be in a cab, and am inclined to doubt that part of the statement. Before being seriously alarmed it would be well to make sure that she has not returned. Perhaps this gentleman—"

Leland paused and looked doubtfully at Jacob. He was wondering if it would do any good to ask for the detective's aid. Until that moment James had hardly bestowed a glance upon Bradstreet, but he now did so.

"A detective!" he exclaimed.

"It seems that you know me."

"I do, in spite of your sailor dress. You are Bradstreet, the detective."

"That's a fact."

"By Jove! you are just the man I want to see!"

"Why so?"

"I want your aid to recover Leobelle. It is useless to deny the fact that she has fallen into the hands of an enemy. I need not say now who he is, or what is the cause of his ill-will, but all these things exist."

Leland shook his head slowly, but James added with his former impetuosity:

"How is it, detective, can we count on you?"

CHAPTER XXIII.

THE MAN IN THE SHOOTING-GALLERY.

THERE was considerable eagerness in young Blake's manner, and Steady Hand did not keep him in suspense.

"If your sister is in trouble, common humanity will require me to render what aid I can," he answered.

"Come with me, then. We will first go home, to make sure that she has not returned, and then look further."

James started off in the direction of Hicks street, and Dudley and Bradstreet followed. The latter was inclined to think that a good deal of disturbance was being made over nothing; that the danger existed only in James's upset nerves; and that Leobelle would return home safe and sound, but he was willing to follow the course of events.

The Blake home on Hicks street was soon reached, and James entered by means of his key. His mother was in the parlor, but one glance was enough to establish the fact that Leobelle had not returned.

"Haven't you found her?" Mrs. Blake asked, anxiously.

"No."

"It is very strange!"

"Not to me. That scoundrel has abducted her. I am tempted to go over to New York and settle with him at once!"

The impetuous young man clinched his hand, and his face flushed with angry emotion.

"Even if she is in trouble, you may wrong Alden Winchester," suggested Mrs. Blake, timidly. "Possibly he does not know anything about any of us."

"Mother, you may as well know, at once, that I called upon him yesterday. I went in the faint hope that my suspicions were unfounded, and that he would be honorable enough to do us justice. What do you suppose was the result?"

No one answered, and the excited speaker went on bitterly:

"I was received with scorn and contempt. He absolutely denied that his brother had ever married, and practically called me a liar and black-mailer!"

James was too excited to measure his words carefully, and was running to exaggeration without any actual intention of wronging any one.

"I implored him to do us justice, but might as well have talked to a rock. He listened with icy calmness; he felt that he had the whole case in his hands, and that he could afford to defy me. This he did, abusing me until I could bear it no longer. I left, and that is all I know about him. Isn't it enough? Doesn't it show how bitter an enemy we have?"

The fiery speaker ceased speaking, but no one answered. Dudley Leland was calmer and stronger of mind. He felt that James had not been the one to lay the case before Winchester. If he had spoken so intemperately, then, it was not strange that he failed.

Mrs. Blake's gaze wandered to Bradstreet's face, and there became fixed. A puzzled expression on her own face was succeeded by a look of recognition.

"I have seen you before, sir!" she exclaimed.

"May I ask where?" Jacob returned, politely.

"In the drug-store, when I recovered from my swoon."

"Your memory is good."

"I am very grateful for your aid."

"You may well be," James interrupted.

"This gentleman, mother, is a well-known detective, and, if we can prevail upon him to give us his assistance, he may aid us to understand much that we cannot now comprehend."

Bradstreet felt that he was going ahead rapidly in certain directions, but, though the situation was not of his seeking, he did not very much regret it. Intimacy with the Blakes would certainly give him a great deal of light, though it might not aid him to solve the mystery of the Concord street house.

James's account of the way he had been received by Winchester had been of interest. Jacob had no means of knowing that it was greatly exaggerated, and it appeared to increase the evidence against the wealthy New Yorker.

He seemed to be almost within the net. But little more was needed to complete the evidence.

Leland interrupted at this point to remind James that they were forgetting Leobelle. Even to him, her prolonged absence was beginning to seem mysterious and ominous.

James came back to the point with zeal, and proposed that they go out at once and make a search. He would have included Bradstreet in the party, but the latter excused himself. He could not afford to go about searching for a lost girl, who might not be lost at all, when more pressing business demanded his attention. He told the young men that he would be at home at four o'clock, and if they desired his aid, they could come to him then.

No more could well be expected of him. They left the house, separated near the door, and while they went up Hicks street, he moved toward Fulton.

For quite a while he walked on, but finally slackened his pace, and began to regard with curiosity a building not far in advance. It was one which he knew was the resort of men who were no better than the law demands.

More than once he had taken men out of the saloon; more than once he had gone there to meet criminals in a friendly way, for business purposes.

In this generation there is little trace of that "honor among thieves," which is said to have existed once, and some of the most valuable police clues are gained by inducing knaves to betray each other.

There may not be anything romantic about such detective work, but it is often effective.

Bradstreet had a certain criminal in mind, who he thought might be there, though it was by no means certain, and he wished to see him. The man was well-informed in regard to burglars and their latest work, and the detective thought that it might be settled speedily whether that class of men had done the deed on Concord street.

On the lower floor of the building indicated there was a saloon, and, next to it, a shooting-gallery. Jacob noticed that the latter was crowded, but gave the matter no further thought, then he entered a saloon, and almost the first person that he saw was the man whom he was seeking.

The latter had run a long career of crime, but, as far as the police knew, had abandoned his old ways. It was suspected that he was living on the proceeds of some undiscovered burglary, but his ways had relapsed into those suited to a model citizen.

He still made a practice to have his eyes open, and saw Bradstreet almost as soon as he was himself seen, but, though his experienced gaze penetrated the half-disguise made by the sailor-suit, not a change of countenance betrayed his discovery.

He was talking with several boon companions, and he kept it up, but never lost sight of Jacob, watching him so shrewdly that only the detective was aware of the fact.

Finally the old criminal left his friends and sat down alone. Bradstreet understood the invitation, and went to his side.

"What's up?" the old-timer asked.

"Is anything up?"

"You want points."

"I do."

"On what?"

"Are there any new breaks?"

"Not that I know of."

"How about the Concord street tragedy?"

This conversation had been carried on so quietly, and with such a careless air, that nobody paid any attention to them; but the question caused the old criminal first to give Bradstreet a sharp glance and then smile in an amused way.

"What about that affair?" he questioned, in return.

"Nettle says burglars did it."

"Nettle is a fool!"

"Granted! His opinion does not count, but what is your opinion?"

"No burglars in it."

"Are you sure?"

"It was no job of the 'profesb.' I won't answer for the amateurs. There are new men going into every industry, of course, and I ain't on to their jobs. If that deed was done by a burglar, he was in the freshman class. Don't believe it was them, anyhow."

"Who, then?"

"Now, you stump me. None of the 'boys' seem to be 'on.'"

Bradstreet was silent.

"How about his nibs, the brother?" added the old criminal, after a pause.

"Surely, you don't suspect him?"

"I'm not working the case."

"Have you any grounds to suspect him?"

"No; but he may be good game to hunt. It's an off-hand suggestion, Bradstreet; I haven't a grain of evidence. Take it, or leave it, as you wish. You know me—I'm square!"

"I guess you're all right. What's going on in the shooting-gallery?"

Hearty applause in that quarter had led to the question, and the old criminal arose.

"Some one is doing himself proud, I suppose," he remarked. "Let's have a look at him."

They entered the other room. At the further end was a line of targets, and at the marksman's line stood a tall, dark-faced man who, it seemed, had been earning the applause of the crowd back of him. Just then, however, he was not using a rifle, but, instead, held a long-bladed knife by the point.

"Shooting is all very well," he was saying, volubly, "but there are other accomplishments. You Americans have but few of any kind; you forget all other things in your mad scramble for money. In my country we do things different, and have all manly sports at our fingers' end. What one of you will dare to pin a five-dollar bill to the wall for me to throw this knife at, I to take it if I hit the target?"

There was no reply, but Steady Hand's companion touched his arm slyly.

"Ruric Demidoff, the Russian sword-master," he announced, in a low voice.

"A criminal?"

"Not to my knowledge, but his associates are shady. Keep an eye on him!"

CHAPTER XXIV.

THE KNIFE THROWER'S TARGET.

THE detective had not needed the first explanation, for he had recognized Ruric Demidoff at once, but his last question had not been asked idly. Desirous of keeping informed as to all of the doubtful persons in the twin cities, he would have welcomed more information in regard to the Russian.

The latter surveyed the crowd with a smile which gradually expanded to a sneer.

"What?" he cried, "does no one accept my wager? The Americans are a brave people, and I've heard it said that they would bet on all things from a horse-race down to the number of hairs on a cat. See! I am to hurl this knife the length of the room at a small target. Unless I pin the target to the wall, I lose the wager. Who puts up a five-dollar note?"

Silence reigned in the crowd for awhile, and then a voice broke the silence.

"I ain't got no five-dollar note, an' I ain't built jest right fur a gambolier, nohow; but I like ter encourage foreigners in their efforts ter git a footin'. I hev here, mister, a vallerable educational work in book-form, called Maplebud's Agricultural Axioms, which ought to be in every household. Old bachelors ought ter hev two. Shows how ter plant strawberries an' sow pertaters, an' all other farmin' facks. I'll let ye hev a heave with yer glitterin' outlass at the book, ef you'll pay me five dollars fur it in advance!"

And Clover Crookback, who had stepped forward with his greasy old book, removed from its usual covering of soiled newspapers, beamed good humoredly upon Demidoff.

"Bah!—are you crazy?" Ruric demanded.

"I may be an artom, fur the line between a crazy person an' a philanthropist is delicate; they're pooty much alike!"

"Slide!"

"Eh?"

"Take your greasy old books out of the way. Paff! I would not soil my hands by touching it—nor by touching a book-agent. One is as bad as the other. Slide!"

He made a menacing gesture toward Old Cy, which made the latter's eyes twinkle angrily.

"I know you. I saw you an' Steve Ridlon 'slide' out o' the New York saloon when Nettle, the detective, walked in!"

The Russian darted a suspicious, hostile glance at Crookback. Until then he had not recognized the old man, and this allusion was not at all to his taste.

He proceeded to cover his annoyance with an immediate and voluble flow of words.

"Since none of you has the courage to put up his money, I will show my skill without charge. In divine Russia we are not so bound up in pretty clothes, and the latest fashion in canes, that we neglect manly sports. Look! and you shall see my skill!"

He drew a card from his pocket and directed the keeper of the gallery to pin it to the further wall. When this was done, he gave his glittering knife a flourish.

"Behold!" he added. "This is what a Russian can do!"

He swung the knife for a moment, and then launched it forward. Its flight was so swift that the observers found it hard to follow it with their gaze—then came the sound of the collision, and it was seen that the card was pinned fast to the wall by other means than those first used; the keen blade was driven deep into the wood, and the handle of the knife quivered as though in triumph.

A cheer came from the observers, but the Russian gave his long mustache a twirl and sneered again.

"It is nothing—to a Russian!" he declared. "Give me the knife!"

The last words were addressed to the keeper of the gallery, who obediently brought the weapon, and, with it, the perforated card. The latter was thrown aside contemptuously by Demidoff.

"Farewell!" he added, assuming a tragic air. "When you learn to heat that, I will see you again. Farewell!"

And he abruptly left the room.

The perforated card had fallen at Clover Crookback's feet, and he beat out an open-eyed boy who made a dive for it by, himself, moving with unexpected quickness. He picked up the card, and looked at the gash of the knife curiously.

Others would have shared his curiosity, but he did not appear inclined to accommodate them; so he clung fast to it and moved to one side. His course was toward Broad street, and, while looking at the bit of pasteboard, he ran against the Detective Napoleon.

"One would think you had found a gold-mine, old man," Jacob observed.

Old Cy held up the card.

"See what a rent the envious Casca made!" he directed, theatrically.

Bradstreet looked, but after the first glance, it was not the gash in the card that interested him. A name was printed there, and the detective read it with surprise.

"Alden Winchester!"

Another occasion and another card were instantaneously recalled. The size of the pasteboard, the particular kind of type used, and all other visible evidence, was in exact keeping with the card found in the coat of the man Zeb Oakes had fought on the river.

It was a striking discovery.

Bradstreet was almost prepared to swear that the two cards had come from the same lot, but a new and interesting problem was presented—how had the wealthy New Yorker's card come into Ruric Demidoff's hands?

If ever a man had a mountain of evidence against him, without his guilt actually being proved, it was Alden Winchester. Even if his supposed connection with the Concord street tragedy was barred out of consideration, it was no slight thing that his cards were in the hands of men not above the notice of law.

"Cut it ter the core, didn't he?" asked Old Cy in a croaking voice, as he looked admiringly at the card.

"It was a dead shot," Jacob admitted.

"I'm goin' ter hang it up in my boodle-war."

"I'll buy it of you."

"Tain't fur sale."

"Then I'll borrow it."

"Tain't fur borrow."

"What do you want of it?"

"Tell ye I want ter hang it in my boodle-war," the old book-agent persisted.

"Your boudoir is all right, and the card of no use to you. I want it! Here; I'll give you twenty-five cents for the thing."

The detective produced the amount mentioned, and Cy looked greedily at the coin.

"Will ye buy a book, too?" he asked. "Valerble work on agriculture. Shows why cows shed their hair in the spring—"

"I don't want your book. Take the coin or not, as you please; I shall keep the card!"

Jacob appeared to be irritated by Cy's persistence, and he thrust the card into his pocket. Crookback unwillingly accepted the coin.

"I've see'd the time when I wa'n't ter be bulldozed!" he muttered, "but my j'int's an' muskles ain't what they was once. I'll go an' read a page in my book ter increase my strength, an' then, mebbe, I'll come around an' thrash ye. Yes, by Cain!"

He turned away in an indignant mood, but few were the wiser for the discussion. Nearly every one there was speaking about the Russian wonder, and Jacob and the book-agent had not raised their voices enough to attract attention.

The detective looked at his watch.

"I shall have to be going," he remarked to the old criminal.

"On Demidoff's trail?"

"No."

"You took his card."

"A mere freak."

"The freaks of detectives make 'shady' gents a good deal of trouble," was the dry reply.

"Good-day."

Broadstreet held out his hand, and the old criminal shook it heartily.

"You ain't the worst of men," he remarked, "and I always did like detectives. The points of resemblance between them and burglars are many, and the variations few. A choice between the two trades is some like taking one's pick between two oranges. Good-day!"

The detective did not resent the slur upon his profession, but went out briskly. The old criminal was in error in thinking that he intended to follow Demidoff. No such idea was in Bradstreet's mind. He had an object in view, but it was thwarted by a circumstance.

He had not gone two blocks when he again met Dudley Leland. The latter's face bore a downcast expression, but it brightened at sight of the detective.

"I was looking for you!" he exclaimed.

"Anything new?"

"Blake's worst fears are verified!"

"How?"

"We have the best of proof that the report that Leobelle was seen in a cab on Hamilton avenue was correct, and have learned that she was accompanied by two men; that they drove to the water, and then took a sail-boat and went off in a course which would take them toward Staten Island."

"Who has told you this?"

"A 'longshoreman' whom James knew. He is a worthy man, has been to call on the Blakes, and knows them all by sight. He will swear that the young lady was Leobelle. He saw her and the two men alight from the cab, go to the boat and sail away. He was so near that, he declares, he could not make any error, but, as he did not regard himself as her social equal, and her companions were well dressed, he did not speak to her."

"Do you know who her companions were?" asked Steady Hand.

"No. Our informant could give but an imperfect description, but we are sure they were strangers. Strangers! Why, of course they were! Rascality now shows its head at every point; she has been abducted, and is now in the hands of her enemies!"

Leland spoke with great agitation, and it was easy to see that his interest in the case was not that of mere friendship. It was easy to see how he regarded Leobelle.

CHAPTER XXV.

THE BOAT AND THE VOYAGERS.

BRADSTREET did not accept these gloomy opinions in haste.

"What did the 'longshoreman' say about Leobelle?" he asked. "Did she appear reluctant to go with the unknown men?"

"No," Leland answered, "but that was to be expected. Some trick was used which deceived her, and she went willingly. What artifice it was we cannot surmise, for she had no friends on Staten Island, or anywhere down that way. In any case, the idea of making the trip in a sail-boat would have aroused her suspicions if some cunning trick had not blinded her."

"Are you sure that they went to Staten Island?"

"No; and that is what troubles us still further. They started in that direction, but the 'longshoreman' did not watch to see if they landed. They may have gone over to the Jersey coast, or even turned and made for some point on the south shore."

"You are positive that the men were not Miss Blake's friends?"

"We are. All her friends—who are few in Brooklyn—have been accounted for."

"Then it does look like an abduction."

Bradstreet thought of Alden Winchester. If he was evil enough to have his own brother killed, he would not hesitate to strike at Leobelle also, though the detective could not exactly see what object he would have in 'abducting' her. Possibly a bold schemer would see a way to force a compromise by holding her, but to do this the

kidnapper must show his hand, and Alden had denied all knowledge of a family belonging to Josiah.

"I have come at Mrs. Blake's request," continued Leland, "to ask if you will join with James and me, and take the lead in an effort to recover Leobelle."

Jacob's decision was already reached.

"I can't let this interfere with regular work," he answered, "but I will give you what time I can. I suggest that we go to Staten Island at once."

"Just our idea. We are satisfied that no more can be learned in Brooklyn, and the trail seems to turn Staten-I-landward. If the sail-boat landed there, we may find some one who saw it. Now, James was to meet me at the Sands street end of the bridge, and I think he must be there now."

"We'll take a car and go at once."

The plan was promptly put into effect, and they were soon bowling along Washington street.

James was found at the bridge-entrance, and as they mounted the well-worn steps to take a car, he explained that he had been successful in getting two revolvers. Steady Hand made no comment, and he thought the occasion one when it was justifiable to carry "concealed weapons."

They entered the car; the "grip" was applied after the boisterous little bridge-engine left them; and then they started for New York.

In due time they reached the lower part of the city, took the ferry-boat for the south and landed at Staten Island. Once there the actual labor of the expedition began, and none of the party expressed any great amount of confidence. A great deal would depend upon chance, and the only system which they could adopt was to proceed to the east side of the island and investigate.

A team was obtained, and in this they set out, their purpose being to interview every man they found along the shore. Some of them might have noticed the sail-boat particularly, but so, too, they might have noticed a dozen of other craft of like nature.

By the time the searchers made their start it was half-past five o'clock, and, though the days were long at that season of the year, comparatively little time remained in which to investigate before dark.

The original plan was adhered to, and they drove along the shore, stopping now and then to interview the people they encountered. All had seen sail-boats out on the water, but inquiry became monotonous as man after man replied that he had seen none which contained a party whose description applied to the desired trio.

These inquiries consumed a good deal of time, and but an unsatisfactory stretch of coast had been covered when Blake, looking at his watch, found that seven o'clock had arrived.

"Only an hour more of daylight," he observed, in a discouraged tone.

"We can go on after dark," Leland suggested.

"The shore will probably be deserted, then."

"We can inquire at the houses."

"I'm afraid they did not come to Staten Island, at all."

"That is not proved."

"Nor is it proved that they did."

"Mr. Bradstreet is silent. It would not surprise me if he had more ideas than either of us."

"Ideas are not of much value until we get a clew," Jacob answered. "I see nothing to be discouraged about in the fact that we have no clew yet. If Miss Blake has really been abducted, her enemies would use great caution, I presume. Probably they had a prison prepared for her, and it would not be in a public place. Unless perfectly sure of the deception you infer they have practiced upon her, they would wish to land at some lonely point. The country ahead of us seems to fill that demand. Drive on, Blake, and don't allow your courage to fail."

"You don't understand my fears fully," replied James, gloomily.

"I think I do."

"If my theories are correct, her very life is in peril."

"I do not think so. What could be gained by murdering her?"

"What if it is the purpose of Alden Winchester to remove the real heirs, one by one? I told Leobelle, at the beginning, that I suspected such to be his purpose."

"My ideas do not coincide with yours. If such were his purpose he would have struck at you first, as the most dangerous of your family."

Leland was cheered by this logic, and James tried to be, but he found it difficult. In the way of mere logic stood the fact—if his belief was correct—that Leobelle really had been abducted.

A rocky stretch of coast was found ahead of them, where there was little to investigate, and more time slipped away before they reached a better place. When they did it was where the high coast-line gave place to a little bay, and out on the water they saw a boy steering a sail-boat in toward the shore.

* No other person, and no house, was in sight, and Blake promptly hailed the boy.

That young man looked up suddenly, regarded them steadily for a moment, and then turned his head.

"Come ashore!" James shouted. "We want to see you."

His words must have been audible, but they were not obeyed. Instead, the boy suddenly changed the course of his craft, and it began to recede.

"Hallo!" cried Blake. "Come back here and earn a dollar!"

But the boat rapidly receded, and the young navigator did not again turn his head.

"He's afraid," observed the Detective Napoleon.

"Why should he be?"

"I don't know."

"Thinks we want to steal his boat, perhaps," suggested Leland. "However, we can't get any good out of him, and twilight is fast gathering, James. Drive on!"

Blake reluctantly obeyed, and their journey was resumed, but a bend of the road, a few rods distant, unexpectedly took them into sight of a house which had been concealed before. Several children were playing near the door, and one of the small tribe was held in the arms of a woman.

"Here's our chance," Leland said, and they drove up to the cottage.

"Madam," James began, "is your husband at home?"

"The poor soul is dead," she answered.

"Have you no men-folks here?"

"No."

"Humph! Have you seen a strange boat off the shore during the afternoon?"

"A what?"

"A boat with two men and a girl, who were strangers here."

"There's a boat over in the cove which was left there by some strangers. My son, Tim, saw it there."

"Where is Tim?"

"Down som'er's by the water, I dare say."

"He's the young rascal with the boat," observed Bradstreet, in a low voice. "I thought he seemed to be afraid of us. He has appropriated it, and fears the consequences. Madam," raising his voice, "who left the boat in the cove?"

"Oul the two men who was with the young lady."

"Who were they?"

"I didn't see them, but they was strangers. Tim said so, an' he knows every man, woman, child an' dog on Staten Island. He's a corker!"

"Do you really mean to say that two men and a young lady, strangers, came ashore in a sail-boat?"

"Would I be after telling you so if they didn't?"

"We mean no offense, madam. Where did they go?"

"I don't know, but Tim can tell yez."

It became evident that "Tim" was the king-pin of that particular family, and that nothing could be learned without seeing him. There was much encouragement in what the woman had said, and Bradstreet bade his companions remain where they were until he made another attempt to subdue Tim.

He left the carriage and walked toward the cove, but, just before he reached the water, he met the boy lately seen in the boat. This time the youth looked composed and fearless.

"Hallo, my young friend!" Jacob saluted; "have those people got back for their boat yet?"

"What boat?" the boy coolly asked.

"The one hid down in the cove. I want to find the owners. Do you know where they went?"

"Didn't ask 'em?"

"Which way did they go?"

"Didn't look ter see."

"Do you suppose a dollar would enliven your memory?"

Bradstreet exhibited the coin, and the boy brightened up wonderfully.

"It's all comin' back ter me!" he declared. "Give me the dollar ter loosen the sinners o' my tongue, an' I'll tell all about it!"

CHAPTER XXVI.

SUMMONED AWAY.

IN a house of one of the streets of Brooklyn where the poorest of its population find homes, a man was seated at a rickety table engaged in counting a small sum of money. He was comfortably clothed, but the texture and fit of the garments suggested that they had been purchased where style and shape, either of garment or man, did not enter into the calculation. The money-counter had a sharp face and wide-awake air, but his face also indicated that, beyond a ready tongue, he had nothing to recommend him for intelligence.

He was the fakir who had exhibited the picture of Josiah Winchester in the street, and it stood on its easel, only a few feet away, while he counted his money. It had made but one appearance in public—when its owner had

seen one woman faint at sight of it, he concluded to exhibit the trophy no more.

Having finished counting his money he put it away. Just then there was a knock at the door; he said, "Come in!" and his landlady appeared with a strange man by her side.

"This is him," said the lady, and then she retreated.

The stranger advanced.

"Trimble, by name?" he inquired.

"That's me," answered the fakir, scenting a trade.

"You've got something I want."

"What?"

"That picture!"

The stranger pointed to the portrait on the easel, but looked at Mr. Trimble, and his gaze made that worthy feel uneasy.

"I don't understand," he returned.

"Do you know that you have broken the law?"

"I? No! How?"

"You exhibited it on the public street. Portrait of private citizen; you got it without his consent—"

"He was dead, so I couldn't!"

"Makes no difference: law touches such cases. Comes under Section 811, Penal Code 913; penalty, three years or less, with fine. You went dead against the law!"

Sternly and solemnly spoke the stranger, and Trimble felt his flesh creep. All he knew about the law was that, while peddling around the twin cities, he frequently managed to get policemen after him. He had learned to look upon the law as a horrible monster which was always on the alert to devour him. Whether it really covered this case, he had no means of knowing, but he shook in his shoes.

"I didn't intend any harm," he faltered.

"The law knows no distinction."

"I only showed it once."

"Penalty, three years!"

The fakir wiped his forehead.

"Be you a policeman?" he asked.

"I am a detective, but in the private line. I'm not hard-hearted. Want to get out of it?"

"Do I? Only show me a chance!"

"Give up the picture, then. Private parties not inclined to be severe. Surrender picture and hold your tongue; all good and well. What say?"

"I'll do it right away. It ain't of any use to me, anyhow. I thought it an honest business—"

"Great mistake—liable to give you long term in prison. Criminal offense!"

The caller looked as wise as though he had the legal lore of every chief justice who ever sat on the Supreme Bench of the United States in his head, and the fakir did not doubt that he was getting the law as it was.

"Take the picture!" he faltered.

"Pay you five dollars for it. Here is the money—only one condition attached. Will you swear never to tell any one else about the picture?"

"Yes, indeed!"

"If questioned, say that it was a 'fancy' picture, and not likeness of any one. Declare it was not a copy of any other. Refuse to tell where you got it. Will you? Eh?"

"Yes, yes; I will."

"Good! Wrap up the picture for me, and here is your half-saw-buck."

The fakir made haste, and the objectionable portrait was soon so covered with paper that no one could tell what it was. Then he received the money; the visitor took the picture, administered another caution, and took his departure.

He went at once to a house on Sands street, produced a key and entered. Going to a certain room, with a confident air, he opened the door and walked in. Another man was present, and, if Jacob Bradstreet had been present, he would have recognized Alden Winchester.

"Here we are!" quoth the traveler, briskly.

"Have you the picture?" Alden asked, eagerly.

"As you see."

"Did you have any trouble to get it?"

"Not an atom!"

Winchester breathed a sigh of relief, and then, as his companion cast off the papers and uncovered the portrait, he looked at it thoughtfully. His expression was almost sad for a while, but he soon aroused.

"A mere daub!" he observed. "It must have been done in haste, but the painter was no novice. The likeness is not bad."

"It is well that we have it."

"You are right, Jared. There was danger in this thing, but we have it smothered now. Take a knife and finish the work!"

Jared produced a keen-edged knife, but he hesitated when near the portrait.

"It seems a pity, sir," he remarked, slowly.

"It must be done. All tangible evidence must be put of sight. I am sure that my brother left but two pictures—that dishonest copy, and the original painting. The latter you have secured from the artist, and we have hidden it safely; now we have only to destroy this, and the chance of proving that Josiah was Thomas Blake will be small."

"Unless the Blake family have a picture of him."

"I am quite sure they have not. I do not think my brother had a picture of the kind taken from the time when he was a boy up to that when he sat for the portrait. As I have that, and this copy is in our hands, we are about to make way with the whole lot, so far as the public eye is concerned."

"And the Blake family will find it hard to establish their claim."

"I think so," Winchester complacently agreed.

He made a motion toward the picture, and Jared, after a little hesitation, thrust the knife into the canvas and slit it from side to side. A few motions of the knife reduced the picture to a mere pile of strips, and then he threw the whole lot into the stove.

Alden Winchester watched them burn with a set face, and then slowly remarked:

"So perishes a part of the evidence!"

A cab drew up in front of the Blake house, on Hicks street.

Mrs. Blake was watching anxiously at the window. She did not expect James and his friends back for some time, but it was possible that any moment might bring developments, and her painful anxiety concerning Leobelle kept her on watch.

When the door-bell rung she answered it hastily, and found a respectable-looking man outside. He bowed politely.

"Is this Mrs. Blake?" he asked.

"Yes, sir."

"I have a message for you."

He extended a slip of paper, and she hurriedly unfolded it. Writing was there, and she read as follows:

"DEAR MOTHER:—Leobelle is found. She has not been in the hands of an enemy, but has met with an accident. It is not serious, and she says she can return home at once, if you will come here to accompany her. Please come in the cab. In haste, your son, JAMES."

Mrs. Blake read in a maternal flutter. The writing was in the form of a scrawl, such as one might perpetrate when pressed for time, but it did not occur to her that it might be a forgery. She bestowed no critical notice upon it, but, believing fully, thought only of the alleged fact it revealed.

"Did you see my daughter?" she nervously asked.

"Beg pardon?"

"Did you see the injured young lady?"

"I saw only the young man who called me to the house. He said the note was for his mother—I presume you're she."

"So I am, and I will accompany you at once. Wait for a second only!"

Mrs. Blake hurried back into the house, prepared for the ride, and made her reappearance at the door. She entered the cab; the man mounted to the box; and they started up Hicks street.

In her perturbation Mrs. Blake had forgotten to inquire concerning their destination. She was not the strongest-minded of women, but was a good mother, and the thought that harm had come to Leobelle, even in the way of an ordinary accident, upset her entirely.

She took but little notice of their course, and, being but little acquainted with the streets of Brooklyn, was wholly at sea when the driver had made a few turns. She had an impression that their general course was about south, but was not even sure of that.

She had begun to think the way long, and to notice with a trace of uneasiness that the buildings were growing smaller, older and less respectable of appearance, but her faint misgivings vanished as the cab paused in front of a brick house.

The driver opened the door of the vehicle.

"This is the place, madam," he said, politely.

She alighted. Her thoughts became centered upon Leobelle, and she was as lacking in perspicacity as a child. The driver rung the door-bell and a servant appeared.

"Here's the mother of the young lady," he observed.

"Is she very badly hurt?" demanded Mrs. Blake, with feverish anxiety.

"Dear me, no!" the servant replied. "She's gettin' right chipper, an' said, a bit ago, that if she hadn't sent fur you, she'd start fur home at once. Her brother is with her—I'll show you up!"

Mrs. Blake's heart beat lighter, and she breathed a prayer of thanksgiving.

"How did the accident happen?" she asked.

"I think it was a fall, but I won't be sure. You'll know more about it in a minute!"

Unseen by Mrs. Blake, a cunning grin passed over the servant's face as she uttered the last words, but their arrival on the second floor stopped further conversation of trivial import.

"The young lady was put in a dark room at first, but the gas is now burnin' low, an' you or the young man can turn it up. Walk right in!"

She opened a door. Semi-darkness did exist beyond, and the low-turned gas merely broke it. Mrs. Blake entered, and then paused. No voice welcomed her; she heard no sound.

"James!" she called.

Strangely enough, there was no reply. The

silence was like that of the grave. A feeling of uneasiness rushed upon her, and she hastened to the gas and turned it up. The room became brightly lighted, but it only served to reveal a startling fact—she was alone in the room!

Suspicion and alarm swept over her. She ran back to the door by which she had just entered; it had been noiselessly locked behind her. She hastened to the single window and swept aside the shade; it was firmly boarded up on the inside.

"Great heavens!" she gasped, "I am the victim of a plot. Leobelle and James are not here. I have been decoyed by a lie, and am in the hands of our enemies!"

CHAPTER XXVII.

A SHOT IN THE DARK.

BRADSTREET perceived that he had found the royal highway to the boy's heart, nor was he surprised thereat. Few of the people with whom he came in contact were willing to give information for the sake of obliging another, but money affected them in a way quite different.

The particular boy of the occasion tossed the big silver dollar up in the air, caught it deftly as it descended, and announced himself ready for business.

"Now, then, who came in the boat?" the detective asked.

"Two men and a female," was the terse reply.

"How old was the female?"

"Probably about twenty."

"Dark or fair?"

"'Bout medium. She had sort o' brown hair an' eyes, an' was quite a toler'ble looker. I consider myself a judge o' female charms, an' I confess that I wouldn't blame any young man fur bein' sweet on her. Winked at her, myself, but she didn't ketch on!"

Tim plunged his hands down deep in his pockets, perched his head on one side, and assumed a very mature and rakish air.

"How was she dressed?" Bradstreet asked.

He had not expected anything like a satisfactory reply, for few men notice the attire of ladies except casually, but Young America's answer was ready.

"She had on a right purty dress, it bein' a whitish yarler, with a heap o' brown figgers an' thingumjigs onter it, which made it 'bout half brown. She looked as neat as a baby got up fur exhibition afore a committee of old ladies. She wore some sort o' a contrivance like a gold chain on her neck, with a little gold cross danglin' over her dress. Her hat was a modest affair, with brown straw fur a body, an' a lot o' little white posies, with brown spots, an' some striped ribbons fur sails an' furbelows."

It was not an elaborate description, but it corresponded wonderfully well with that given by James Blake to the Detective Napoleon.

"Did you see them land?"

"I did, that. I was on the bluff, up yonder, lookin' out over the water when I seen their boat come inter sight."

"From where?"

"Wal, I reckon from Brooklyn way. It was well out when I first seen it, an' headed this way. First off, I seen it was a daisy boat, but I can't say as much fur the way it was handled. The men knowed something about the biz, but it would have made an old sailor ache ter the marrer ter see how little they did know."

"And they landed here?"

"Headed straight fur this cove, and landed nigh the bush yonder."

"What then?"

"They left the boat an' all went over that way."

"Did you watch them?"

"Not long; I went ter look at the boat."

Tim did not mention that he had borrowed the craft on his own responsibility, and taken a sail, and Bradstreet did not think necessary to refer to the fact.

"So you didn't have any talk with them?"

"No."

"You look like a shrewd lad."

"Come ter the pint, mister!"

"You must have sized up these folks and come to some conclusion as to what they were."

"I took 'em ter be two men an' a female."

"Never mind your wisdom in that line. Where do you think they've gone?"

"Ain't no idea."

"Did the young lady appear to go with them willingly?"

"I didn't see no signs ter the contrary, though I did notice that she wa'n't very chipper. Seemed ter be cast down about somethin'."

"Have you any neighbors who are hard characters?"

"None nearer than the Winklebys."

"Who are they?"

"Live in a big house over in the hills, a mile away. They do say that the old man and his brood are pooty slippery, but I can't say fur sertain."

"If the late voyagers had kept on in the direction they started, would they have brought up at Winkleby's?"

"They would, ef they went straight enough."

This was the most important statement to be gained from Tim. Either he knew but little, or

he would not tell what he knew. He always had an answer ready, but it did not serve to give much light. However, his description of the girl had been exact enough to convince Bradstreet that they were on the right track. In regard to the men, the descriptions gave no light. Tim thought that neither could be over thirty years old, and the detective could not place them.

Darkness was falling, and their eyesight, upon which they had relied somewhat before, could be of no further aid. They must now work upon a theory, and trust to chance that it was correct.

Jacob believed that Leobelle had been taken to some place previously selected, where she could be held prisoner, and persistent questioning developed no likely place except the home of the Winklebys.

This family consisted of an old man, his wife, and three masculine daughters, and they were described as semi-outcasts. Their neighbors would not associate with them, with a few exceptions, but they found friends enough of a certain kind. Men came as visitors from an unknown place, and turbulent scenes were of almost nightly occurrence. The visitors were supposed to be criminals, but they and the Winklebys avoided lawless depredations on their neighbors, and the den had been allowed to exist.

The thought that Leobelle had been taken among such associates was not pleasant even to the detective, and he saw the necessity of keeping the full truth from James and Leland.

Tim eagerly accepted a request to guide the rescuers to Winkleby's, and after cautioning him, Bradstreet took him to where the young men were waiting. The sight of the boy gave James a new start.

"What luck?" he asked, eagerly.

"Good, I hope, but the proof is lacking."

"Has the boy seen them?"

"He has seen the persons who landed, and I think they may have been those whom we seek!"

Bradstreet then explained the situation, omitting nothing except a detailed account of the reputation borne by the Winklebys.

"It was Leobelle!" James declared.

"The chances of finding her now are not of the best," added Leland, looking around at the darkness which had fully fallen.

"I see nothing to discourage us," coolly replied the detective. "Have you a lantern, Tim?"

"I have, that."

"Get it, and we will be off."

The alert boy was not long in procuring this mute aid, and then they started. James and Leland were full of gloomy forebodings, but ready to meet any danger for Leobelle's sake. Steady Hand thought that both their courage and their revolvers might be needed before the night passed. If a gang of lawless men was always to be found at Winkleby's, they would probably fight recklessly in opposition to any movement toward rescue.

Tim had said that the way was rough, and it proved to be so. Ridges, rocks and bushes lay in their course, and they had done well to take the lantern. It did not stay with them to the end of the journey, however. Tim was sure-footed, but he made one mis-step, slipped, and sat down squarely upon the lantern. It was broken in pieces, but the boy found one source of consolation; they had gone over one-half of the journey.

The way was resumed at a slower pace, but the detective soon ordered a halt.

"Some other person is out," he observed.

His pointing finger directed them, and all saw a light moving in a course slightly zigzag.

"Nother lantern!" quoth Tim.

"And coming this way. Who can it be?"

"Guess we'd better know."

"I should say so. Can we hide near here?"

"Amble arter me!"

Tim skipped away lightly. He had a good knowledge of the ground, and knew that a hut was standing upon a little ridge near at hand. It was a good place of observation, and the hut might prove welcome shelter in case of danger.

Up the ridge he went, and had almost reached the hut door when the darkness, just ahead, was lighted by a sudden flash, the report of a rifle sounded, and Tim went over on his back like a ten-pin.

"I'm a dead man!" he declared, plaintively.

"I wish't you'd bury me inter the ocean."

The shot had caused the three men to drop, for they did not know how soon another salute might follow the first, and they crouched near Tim.

"Where are you hit, my boy?" the detective asked.

"Right in the brain!"

"Impossible or you would not be alive."

"It may be through the lungs."

"I don't believe you are hit."

"If I ain't, it come mighty close!"

"Hadr't we better steer off?" asked Leland, who could not see what they had to do with the belligerent person in the hut.

"Wait!" Bradstreet answered. "The lantern is coming on—we may learn what is up."

Tim had stated that the hut had not had an

occupant for years, and Jacob regarded it as suspicious that some one should be there who would deliberately fire at them without investigation. He could not help thinking that they might already have found those for whom they were seeking.

On came the lantern, and the air of the man who carried it was bold and confident.

"A friend of the shooter," Leland commented.

"If so," Bradstreet replied, "the only mark to recognize him by is the lantern. You have seen how our approach was received."

Just then the light flashed up by the hut again; a second report sounded; the light of the lantern went out in the jingling of broken glass; and a yell sounded from where the unknown had stood.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

WHERE IS LEOBELLE?

ON the second trial the marksman hit a target, if not a human one, and the breaking of the lantern left darkness complete all around; but there was no great lull. While Leobelle's friends were puzzling their brains to find an explanation of the affair, a man rushed past them with long steps, and other dark forms were to be seen dashing through the gloom.

All seemed bound for a common center, and that point was the hut.

"Hoop-lal!" cried Tim, in glee. "We'll see some fun now!"

"Close in!" Bradstreet ordered. "We may be needed here. I'm not sure but Leobelle is there!"

The suggestion was enough to bring both Leland and James quickly to their feet. If she was in danger they were willing and eager to dare anything and everything. Led by the detective they sprung forward close on the heels of the strangers.

Another discharge was expected, and it was clear that if lead was sent flying around much more some one would get hurt, but the result was a surprise.

As the strangers reached the door of the hut they, as well as Bradstreet's party, were surprised to see the door flung open, and a woman appear with a lantern held well aloft.

"Well, gents, what's the racket?" she asked, in a cool and masculine voice.

"Who fired that shot?" roared one of the strangers.

"I did!"

"Do you know you nearly killed me?"

"No! Go away! I fired at a lightning-bug, and, as it went right out, I reckon I hit it!"

"You hit my lantern, an' drove a piece of glass clean through my arm!" shouted the angry man.

"Did it hurt?"

"Hurt! Well, I'll show you— Say, where's the girl? Trot her out!"

"I'm the girl!"

"You're Sal Winkleby. The girl we want is a stranger, and you've got her in there."

"Nary girl in here."

"You spirited her away."

"Suppose I did? If I set out on the job, I'm guns enough to do the job well. The girl has gone on!"

"You lie, Sal! She's in there!"

"Come in and see!"

The woman, who was a tall, gaunt young female, stepped back, and the men made a rush. Into the hut they went, while Tim nudged Bradstreet.

"Say, Sal's got her away!" he declared.

The detective was too uncertain to make any reply. He could not grasp all the points of the game. If the Winklebys were such hard characters it did not look likely that they would be the protectors of any one, but the man who had taken part in the dispute had seemed confident.

He soon came rushing out of the hut, and the light of the lantern showed that he was pale with anger.

"Girl, what have you been doing?" he thundered.

"Been helping to get your game away!" was the defiant retort.

"Where is she?"

"Over in Brooklyn, I dare say."

"It is false! She's hid near here."

"Find her, then!"

"Tell me the truth, Sal. Where is she?"

"Gone!"

"And you have helped her away?"

"Yes."

The man's remarks for the next few seconds were more emphatic than pleasant, but he finally came down to ordinary speech again.

"I didn't think that of you, Sal."

"No; you thought I was as big a villain as you are. The Winklebys ain't got the best of names, but there are worse than them. We've done you up brown, old man. I decoyed you away, and while you chased me, my sisters got the girl off, slick and clean. Considering how long a start they've got, you may as well whistle as to chase them!"

"I'll have her back or die!"

"Go in!"

"Which way have they gone?"

"Do your own hunting, old man!"

The speaker's manner and choice of words did not fill the ideal of refinement, and she looked as coarse as a man, but James Blake could have rushed out and hugged her bony form to his breast out of sheer admiration and gratitude. She stood erect and rugged, and confronted the man without a tremor.

He did not possess any part of her calmness. He was mad all the way through, and in a frame of mind to wreak vengeance upon the girl. He did not attempt it, but turned to his followers.

"We will be off, boys. Our game ain't at Winkleby's, and it follows that they will make for the water. We'll go the same way. Come on!"

The party set off briskly, their course being toward the point from which the Detective Napoleon and his companions had just come. They had just disappeared when Bradstreet arose in his ambush and hastened to the girl's side.

"Young woman," he abruptly began, "can we rely upon you for a friendly explanation?"

She regarded him with the same composure she had before shown.

"Now, then, who are you?" she demanded.

"We are friends of the young lady whom you have aided to escape."

"Go away!" was the skeptical reply.

"I give you my word of honor that it is true. This gentleman is her brother—"

"What's his name?"

"James Blake."

"Humph! There may be something in it."

Tim presented himself at the front.

"There is somethin' inter it, Sal!" he declared. "You know me—I ain't no alderman or saloon-keeper, but I kin tell the truth as well as them. These gents hired me ter help find this feller's sister, an' they are on the square."

"In heaven's name!" James added, "if you can tell us of Leobelle, do so!"

"Leobelle!" repeated the masculine girl.

"That's her, an' I guess you're white. Two men were taking her to some place further on, but they got lost and stopped at our house to inquire the way. Then me and my sisters tumbled to the racket, and set out to beat them. We did it, too. We got Leobelle away, and then, while my sisters towed the little craft for a safer port, I made the enemy believe I was Leobelle, got them to chase me, and led them a jolly chase, you bet!"

She laughed heartily at the recollection.

"Where is Leobelle, now?" James demanded.

"She's gone to the coast."

"What part?"

"Why, to get the boat, and go back."

"Do you mean the boat in which Leobelle was brought to Staten Island?"

"Yes."

"Then our course does not admit of doubt."

Bradstreet turned to his allies as he made this brief comment. He had full confidence that the masculine-looking girl was telling the truth, and knew that it was their proper way to hasten back to the cove with all possible speed.

Hearty thanks were tendered the girl who had proved that she was not as black as she had been painted, and then away they went. This time they had no lantern to save them from the pitfalls and obstacles by the way, but, in their present mood, they were reckless of ill consequences, and they hurried on with boldness which amounted to what was reckless.

Now and then some one of the party had a tumble, but this did not prevent them from keeping up their pace. Bruised joints and shins did not count in that game.

Steady Hand had a presentiment that something might occur before they reached the cove which would worry them afresh, but his fears were unfounded.

All was quiet around them; they did not see the other party of searchers; and no disturbing sound came from the vicinity of the cove.

In due time they drew near the destination. The detective noticed that no light was visible in Tim's house. This probably indicated that everything had been peaceful around there, and that Tim's mother and her interesting brood had retired for the night, but it might indicate quite the contrary.

The searchers lost no time in hurrying down the bluff to the cove. As they emerged from the bushes they saw the miniature bay, and a portion of "The Narrows," beyond, but all was strikingly quiet. If any craft, large or small, was out, she showed no light. As for the fugitives and the rival party of hunters, the death-like silence around the cove seemed to make a statement of its own.

"Now, to see if the boat is here!" Jacob exclaimed.

Tim's youthful legs carried him to the water's edge much quicker than any one else could get there, and then his shrill voice piped:

"It's here, jest as I left it!"

The discovery was rather alarming. According to their understanding, it was the purpose of the other Winkleby sisters to get the craft and cross the intervening water with it, landing Leobelle safely on the Long Island shore.

Not a word passed the men's lips, but, as they overtook Tim, they saw the sail-boat rocking on the water.

"It's queer!" Leland muttered.

"Great heavens! where is Leobelle?" James demanded.

"Possibly her protectors took her elsewhere," suggested the detective.

"Where could they take her?"

"Are there not plenty of places on Staten Island?"

"Wal, I should smile!" Tim chimed in. "Take this fur a backwoods borough?"

"Well, where are we to look now?"

This practical question came from Leland, and no one had a reply ready; all were at fault. Sure enough, where should they look for her?

"Her enemies were in close pursuit," Leland added, "and we cannot afford to let any time go to waste. Can you suggest a way, Bradstreet?"

All looked at Jacob, and at least two were in a state of deep anxiety, but they were not relieved at once. Steady Hand pondered.

"Tim," he finally said, "where, if not here, would they naturally go?"

"Might go 'most anywhere."

"With the Winkleby girls as guides, the movements of the trio would be, I should say, practical and systematic. If I were well acquainted here—"

A sharp exclamation from Tim stopped the speaker. The water was as fascinating as usual to the boy, and he had stood looking out toward the Long Island shore. Suddenly he gave a start and exclaimed:

"Jehosaphat crickets! look a-thar!"

Bradstreet's gaze followed the youth's pointing finger, and a strange scene was revealed. Near the center of the cove, the water for several yards around, which had recently been so dark, was illuminated by a brilliant white light, and in the center of the circle was the form of a man, the resting-place of whose feet was the liquid surface.

The detective gazed in amazement at the phenomenon for a moment. Then three words passed his lips:

"The Water-Walker!" he exclaimed.

Sure enough, it was the mystery of the twin cities, now transferred to the bay-island, and he appeared not to have undergone any change since he was seen on the East River.

Time, place and distance seemed to be of no consequence to the strange being.

CHAPTER XXIX.

TURBULENT SCENES ON THE WATER.

LELAND and Blake were utterly amazed by what they saw. Bradstreet had entered into no confidences with them, and had never mentioned the Water-Walker; and though the story of Zeb Oakes and his fellow boatman had become public, it had been received with skepticism. Now, the young man did not remember it, and had no precedent to guide them to an understanding of the strange sight.

It was the Nineteenth Century, when miracles were few and far between, yet they saw a man walking on the water with perfect ease.

His course was a diagonal one across the cove, and the strange white light which shone around him made his every motion perfectly visible. They could see the movements of his legs and arms; they could see how, never turning his head to the right or left, he was walking away.

"Jumpin' kangaroos an' belayin' pins!" was the exclamation with which young Tim expressed his wonder, and broke the profound silence.

"It is the Water-Walker!" Bradstreet repeated.

"The what?" gasped Blake.

"The water mystery. Quick! let us take the boat and pursue!"

"You forget Leobelle!" urged Leland.

"Sure enough."

Jacob uttered the words reluctantly, for he was eager once more to chase the nautical wonder.

"Say, let's go for him!" cried Tim.

As he spoke, and while every gaze was riveted upon the Water-Walker, a new object of interest crossed the vision. Suddenly a boat flashed out of the darkness into the outer edge of the circle of white light, and they saw that it had three occupants, all females, two of whom were using oars in the most approved style.

"Leobelle!" Leland cried.

"It is she!" Blake added.

"They seem alarmed," observed the detective, doubtfully, as he noticed the vigor of their movements. "We can't follow in the sail-boat, for there isn't a breath of wind."

"I've got a boat hid in the bushes," Tim announced. "I didn't intend ter tell ye, but I must go out an' see that 'tarnal critter. Come on!"

He darted a few yards away, and began to pounce around in the bushes. His movements soon developed a boat of a size just about right for them.

Leland and Blake quickly entered, but Bradstreet paused for a moment with his foot raised for the step. The Water-Walker did not lose any degree of his fascination, and the detective was observing his progress. As he did so another boat crossed the edge of the white light, and its crew—men, in this case—were tugging

desperately at the oars, and going in the same direction taken by the girls."

It was, beyond doubt, the old party of pursuers!

Bradstreet leaped into the boat.

"Pull!" he cried, excitedly.

The words had hardly passed his lips when he was assailed with a painful fear. He was a fair oarsman, if given his time, but wholly incapable of pulling a race like the one ahead of them, and, however skillful Tim might be, he had not strength enough for such severe work.

What was to be done?

He experienced great relief when Dudley Leland suddenly asserted himself.

"Sit down, all, and give me room!" the young man cried, and then he grasped the single pair of oars with which the boat was equipped.

Quick-witted Tim pushed the craft clear of the bank, Leland caught the water skillfully, and then they started through the water at an encouraging rate.

Tim turned his head, and then whistled softly.

"Hullo! the travelin' demmon is gone!" he exclaimed.

Bradstreet's thoughts and attention had temporarily wandered from the Water-Walker, but this assertion recalled the mystery. He looked and found it as Tim had said; the white light had gone out, and the Walker was nowhere to be seen. Jacob was sure, too, that he was not standing on the surface of the water. Despite the darkness they had, from their present position, a very fair view, and the strange traveler was not visible. He had gone in a way as mysterious as he was, himself; when no one was looking, he had gone—Where? How?

Leland was rowing bravely, and getting a good deal of speed out of the boat, and the detective forced himself to think only of the practical work before them.

Neither of the other boats was to be seen, but it was practically certain that they were being gained upon. Tim's boat was admirably calculated for speed, and Leland was making the most of all chances. This fact aroused realization of certain possibilities in the near future.

"Is your revolver ready, Blake?" the Detective Napoleon asked.

James held up his hand.

"It is here!" he tersely answered.

He had said enough. Already the weapon was drawn, and ready for use.

"Sa-ay, can't I have one, too?" Tim asked, wishfully.

"We have no extra weapons."

"I'd try ter do good work with it."

"We have no choice, for we can't give you what we lack ourselves."

"Wal, I've got my fists left!"

The boy spoke philosophically, and, if his thoughts had been known, was more eager than any one else for a fight. He was not actuated by the same motives as the others, but by a natural liking for a fight, and he fully intended to go in with the rest, regardless of his lack of years and avoirdupois.

The point where the cove widened into the "Narrows" was nearly reached without any sign of the other boats, and, well aware that it might be hard to find them if it came to a search on the broader expanse of water, Jacob asked Leland to let their own craft drift for a moment, to see if they could detect the sound of other oars.

This was done, but nothing whatever was heard.

"Pull on!" Bradstreet quickly directed.

Again the boat was urged forward.

They had been following the same diagonal course taken by the other boats, and were approaching the place where the land put out a sharp, high point to mark the end of the cove. As they did so, and when only a few feet away, another boat suddenly rounded the point, coming from the opposite direction, and bore down upon them.

Steady Hand was the first to see it, and two ideas flashed upon him—first, that the meeting was as much of a surprise to the strangers as to themselves; secondly, that a collision was inevitable.

He shouted a warning, and every oar was lifted, but the impetus of the boats carried them together before anything more could be said. They narrowly missed striking head on, but it was their sides that finally collided, and neither was damaged thereby.

They recoiled from the shock, and drifted somewhat apart.

The detective was not slow to recognize the strangers as the late pursuers of the girls, as seen in the white light, and some motive stirred the rival crew into hostility.

"At them, boys!" shouted an angry voice.

"Run the dogs down!"

"Keep off!" cried Steady Hand, in reply.

"We do not want any trouble, but we are armed, and shall meet you with revolvers. Keep off!"

"At them!" repeated the unknown leader, fiercely.

The other oarsmen had caught the water, and were turning their boat, but there was neither the time nor the chance to prepare for a straight-away race.

"Run her ashore!" ordered Bradstreet, feeling most painfully the fact that he must remain idle at this crisis.

Leland kept his head and his nerve. He comprehended the plan and set out to execute it. As quickly as possible he swung the boat around and pulled for the land, but it was a fruitless endeavor. The larger boat had the advantage of position and priority of start, and once more she came bearing down upon them.

"Drop your oars!" the detective added. "If we must fight, give them a warm reception!" And he seized one of the oars and stood ready to get the first blow.

It was at that moment, when they had their hands more than full, that a scream of terror in a feminine voice broke upon the air. It sent a painful chill to the blood of the defenders. It had come from the land, and their liveliest apprehensions were aroused.

The same thought occurred to each—Leobelle was near at hand; she was in peril, and they could not go to her aid.

Once more the boats came together. The larger held five men, and two of them stood ready to board the smaller craft, but Bradstreet swung the oar and knocked the foremost over.

A moment later and the others came swarming over the intervening space, and the fight became hand-to-hand.

Despite the fact that they had revolvers and had threatened to use them, it was not done. They were men who realized how serious recourse to extreme measures was, and, in spite of evidence to the contrary, the strangers might be well meaning.

They had a warm reception, even Tim taking part in it. That young man was in high spirits, and he sprung at one of the enemy like a wild-cat. Blows were given and received, and Steady Hand and his friends presented a firm, orderly front and worked in harmony. Yells of pain and rage came from the assailants, but the only sounds from the smaller party were of a peculiar nature. Tim was striking and scratching constantly, but he found opportunity to send out several shrill imitations of the crowing of a barn-yard fowl.

On the whole it seemed that the defenders had nothing to fear, but the fight was brought to an abrupt termination. The equilibrium of the little boat had been seriously affected from the first, and, at last, it gave a lurch, turned over, and deposited all the combatants in the water.

Bradstreet made an agile leap which took him out of the knot of struggling men. The way was open for him to swim to the shore, and this, he knew, was the proper course to take.

He had not forgotten the feminine scream.

But what about his companions?

CHAPTER XXX.

THE DOUBLE STORY OF THE NOTE.

THE detective's mental question was speedily answered. Leland and Blake had heard the scream and drawn conclusions therefrom, and they were even more eager to reach shore than Bradstreet had been.

Greatly to the latter's relief he saw all three of his allies appear, swimming in the direction he wished to go, and he urged them on.

No pursuit was made, the strangers contenting themselves with angry talk and efforts to regain their own boat.

In a short time the smaller party reached the shore, and James expressed the thought which was in every mind by uttering one word:

"Leobelle!"

"Follow me!" Leland added; and then he ran toward the quarter from whence the scream had sounded, with his companions close behind.

After breaking through a fringe of bushes they found an open wood before them. It was not a place favorable to discoveries in the night, but they went on as rapidly as possible. They were still progressing when something brought them up hurriedly. It was a challenge in a female voice.

"Halt!"

They hesitated; they paused.

"Keep off!" the voice added, "or I'll send some lead into you!"

James Blake was pressing forward again, heedless of the challenge, but the detective caught his arm. The latter had heard the "click" of a revolver, and knew that the warning meant all that it verbally conveyed.

"Is Leobelle Blake there?" Bradstreet asked, in a low, but clear voice.

There was no reply.

"If so, let her speak for herself. Her brother is here."

Brief silence followed, and then the former speaker returned:

"Let the brother speak for himself!"

"I am here!" declared James. "Leobelle, if you are, indeed, there—"

He paused. An exclamation had sounded in the darkness, followed by a rustling of the shrubbery, and then a female form came out hastily. A moment later James had Leobelle in his arms—the lost was found.

Tim began to dance a jig, but Bradstreet saw two tall young women follow in Leobelle's footsteps, and he left James and Dudley to enter-

tain the rescued girl, and went to meet the others.

"If I am not in error, you are the Misses Winkleby," he remarked.

"That's about the size of it," was the bluff reply.

"Your sister has told us of your good work."

"Our sister?"

"Yes; we met her by chance, and she told us a good deal. You are deserving of great credit, and I thank you most heartily."

"We had a hard pull," declared one of the girls, as bluffly as ever, and with an air of relief. "They chased us sharp, and the only way that we did them up was to make believe we were going out to sea. Really, we only crossed the cove, and landed on this side."

"You showed good judgment, and I think your enemies were wholly at fault. All I fear is that they heard that scream—"

"It was the other girl; she was scared. We saw the Water-Demon again!"

"What do you call the Water-Demon?"

"He's a critter who has been tramping around Staten Island lately, and always by walking on the water—"

"You must have seen him and his white light to-night."

"We did; and we rowed right up close to him. Leobelle was scared, but we don't care a rap for him. I always said he was human, and I know it now. We got so close to him that we could see that he was a living man. Or," she more doubtfully added, "we think so. He looked like it."

"So he has been seen here before?"

"Two or three times, but not much has been said about it. Some were superstitious, and afraid of him; and some were afraid of being laughed at; so those who have seen it have kept mighty shy."

James, Leobelle and Leland approached.

"Mr. Bradstreet," said the former, "my sister wishes to thank you for your services in her cause."

"Indeed, I do!" Leobelle added, earnestly. "I am very grateful to all who have been so kind to me to-night."

"We are glad to have helped you, but more practical matters claim my time. Your enemies seem to have lost all trace of you, or lost their courage—I do not think we need to fear them. But I have very important reasons for asking who their leader was."

"According to Leobelle's belief, my theory was wrong," James answered.

"In other words, it was not—"

"Alden Winchester? If it was, his hand was concealed. It was one I have always regarded as my friend; a man who lately asked Leobelle to marry him. He was refused, kindly, but firmly. You can see to what a pass his evil nature led him. This man was Carlos Edlock!"

Steady Hand was silent. He had hoped to get some clew to more important matters from the adventure, but he could not see how Edlock interested him.

"Leobelle was decoyed away," James added, "by a false message from our mother, which said that she had been suddenly called to Staten Island, to join me and attend to vitally important business, and requested Leobelle to go with the messenger, cross the Narrows in the sail-boat and meet us. My sister, as you know, is not a city girl, and she fell into the trap."

"There was so much said about the sudden and important business!" pleaded Leobelle, in her own behalf. "I thought it might refer to—"

She paused, and James added:

"You can surmise what, Mr. Bradstreet."

"If," replied the detective, thoughtfully, "you did not see Edlock, how do you know it was he who instigated the abduction?"

"A piece of paper dropped from the pocket of one of my captors. Here it is. If you could see to read it, you would see his name signed to it."

"Preserve that paper carefully," advised her brother. "Edlock must be punished, and that is the proof against him."

Steady Hand did not think further discussion necessary, and he proceeded to put affairs on a moving basis. He felt that it would be folly to search for the Water-Walker, knowing that person's faculty for evading pursuit. He had appeared in the wood, minus his white light, but had fled precipitately when Leobelle screamed.

He had had time to get a long distance away, and, if near at hand, had abundant chance to hide.

Clearly, the best thing they could do was to start for Brooklyn. James suggested that they take the sail-boat, but Leobelle opposed the plan, and, as they had a team near, it was decided to return as the rescuers had come.

They went to Tim's house without seeing the hostile crew of the boat, or the boat, itself. There they parted with the Winkleby girls. The latter might not be all that they ought in the way of feminine gentleness, but they had done Leobelle heroic service, and abundant thanks were followed by the promise of more substantial rewards in the future.

When all this formal business had been transacted, and Tim made happy with a cash present, Bradstreet, Leobelle, James and Dudley entered the carriage and the return journey was

begun. The lateness of the hour caused them to urge on the horse, and their progress was rapid.

On the way Leobelle went more into details than before, but the account of her adventures and troubles was of more interest to the young trio than to any one else.

In due time they reached the place where their team had been engaged. It was returned, and then they hastened to the ferry-house. Shortly after, they were on their way to New York.

The Detective Napoleon was not one to let anything go without investigation, and he asked to see the note referred to by Leobelle, as soon as they were in the cabin. He found the following words written thereon:

"Let me impress upon your mind the need of a plausible fellow to act as decoy. She is timid, and no one but a man of gentlemanly appearance and address can succeed. Instruct him carefully, for the hints I have given you all have deep meaning. Don't forget the 'important business' bait. It will catch her."
C. EDLOCK!"

The note was not important in itself, and was principally significant as showing that the writer had a tool to whom he thought he could write without fear, but there was something that brought a puzzled expression to the detective's face.

Where had he seen that writing before?

For some time he studied it without getting any light, but the truth came suddenly when he found it. Memory flashed back to the note which had come for Josiah Winchester the morning after the Concord street fire—the note which had commanded that man to meet the writer and pay for the price of silence, but which had come too late to be received by the victim of the tragedy.

The two notes were in the same handwriting!

It would have been a bold assertion for a novice to make, for there were radical points of dissimilarity, but Jacob was an adept in such matters.

The second note was in an easier, more flowing hand, showing that the first had been subject to an attempt at disguising the penmanship, but in various ways the writer had betrayed himself. It is easy to deceive the casual eye, but not a trained one.

Judging in an off-hand way, Carlos Edlock stood branded as one who would have blackmailed Winchester had the latter lived, but it did not seem to throw any light upon the murder.

Bradstreet, it will be remembered, had decided that the writer of the note could not have been concerned in the tragedy, for to write it at that particular time would have been madness if murder was contemplated.

"It will be well," the detective thought, "to see Mr. Edlock. I think he can tell something of interest, if he will!"

CHAPTER XXXI.

WHERE WAS WINCHESTER.

THE following morning the basement bell of a house in Thirty-ninth street, New York, jingled in a mild, subdued way, and when the servant opened the door, she saw a seedy old man whose most noticeable characteristics were his gray beard and an unsightly hump upon his back.

Her face brightened at sight of him.

"Good-morning, Mr. Crookback!" she said, pleasantly.

"Mornin', young lady, mornin'. You see I've come as I said I would."

"Yes, and I'm glad to see you. Come right in!"

"I've brought that article."

"I thought so. Come to the kitchen careful, so you won't be heard."

And Clover Crookback followed where she led, stepping as cautiously as she could wish, but appearing to be in his usual high spirits. As soon as he had a chair in the kitchen he produced from his pocket a ring which sent out little gleams of light, and glittered in a way which made the servant girl almost dance with joy.

She caught it, and admired it, and gloated over it, and devoured it with her eyes as a miser might his gold.

"Genuine imitation o' a diamond," croaked Old Cy, complacently. "Couldn't be tol' from a reel sparkler. All the other gals will be jealous on ye, an' the fellers will fairly worship ye, by Cain! Tol' ye you should hev one ef you'd buy Simpkins's Rural Ways o' Farmin' Knowledge."

"Oh! you're so good!"

"I know it!"

"How much did it cost?"

"The sell at fifty dollars, but I git 'em by wholesale at sixty dollars a dozen."

"But don't it cost me anything?"

"Nothin' only the price o' a book," Crookback replied. "I'm sort of a fillyauntropast, as they say in Latin. I've got rich in trade—here he skillfully covered with his hand a hole in the knee of his trousers—"an' I like ter use the money in doin' good, an' makin' others happy."

The girl was delighted, and she said so. She showered him with thanks, and exulted over the

acquisition of the ring; he smiled broadly, let her go on, and humored her. But he had more to say, and he said it fifteen minutes later.

"Got a good place here?" he asked.

"Boss!"

"Been here long?"

"No. I used to work for Alden Winchester, but I didn't like it, and I left."

"Winchester? He's the man who was killed."

"No; it's his brother."

"Hum! He must feel awful bad. Did he take on like Cain over the killin'?"

"Not much!" was the emphatic reply.

"Was he at home the night 'twas done?"

The servant shot Mr. Crookback a suspicious glance, but he was not looking at her at all. He was looking at a flowering plant which stood in one corner, his expression as vague and far-away as though he had no thought in his mind except of the plant.

Her suspicions were allayed, but she did not give a direct answer. This did not seem to trouble Old Cy. He continued to regard the plant and talk about Winchester, and he also threw in an allusion to the imitation diamond ring.

The girl was suddenly seized with one of those uncontrollable impulses to talk, which attack people of a certain temperament.

"Don't speak to me about the Winchesters!" she exclaimed. "I left that house because I didn't dare to stay!"

"Go away!"

"I tell you it's a fact. There's some things I can't understand. No, sir! Alden Winchester wa'n't in that night. He went away, in spite of the rain, and what's odd, his wife told a caller that he had gone to the theater; but what do you think I heard?"

"Don't know, really. What was it?"

"The Lord only knows what time that man got home, but I know he got wet clean through. I saw his wet clothes, for I had to carry them to the kitchen, to dry them by the fire. Theater, indeed! But I heard more. A good bit more!"

"Dear me! What was that?"

"I heard Alden Winchester and his wife talk, and I tell you it was mighty interesting. I wouldn't tell it to any of the big-bugs, but we poor folks know a good many things that the rich would just give their silk stockings to get onto, but we never tell. That's why I ain't afraid to tell you."

"Well, I guess by the looks of your clothes that you *did* go over to Brooklyn!" says Mrs. Winchester.

"I did," says he, sort of sharp like.

"What luck?" says she.

"Good! I gave him the key, and I suppose he went into the house and did the work," says Winchester.

"What if you should be found out?" says she.

"No danger of that," says he. "I have considered all the points. Even if my man is discovered, they can't trace it to me."

"What if Josiah was legally married?" says she.

"He wasn't!" says Winchester. "Now, don't say any more about it, and be sure not to let it out that I was in Brooklyn. There would be a great racket if my last night's work was found out!"

"I didn't hear what Mrs. Winchester said, and there couldn't have been much more, anyhow, for she went right to the kitchen with his wet clothes."

"Dear me, dear me—how funny!" croaked Old Cy. "What do you make o' their talk?"

The servant shivered.

"Don't ask me! It wa'n't two hours after when word came that Josiah Winchester was murdered. Don't ask me what it meant!"

She spoke with nervousness which appeared to be genuine, and it was not hard to surmise what her own opinion was.

"Then you really heard Winchester say he was in Brooklyn that night?" asked Crookback, once more turning his attention upon the flowering plant.

"I did; but, for mercy's sake, don't say that I told you about it! I wouldn't have it get out for all the world. But I couldn't stay in that house, and left right off, quick. I wouldn't trust my life there!"

"It's awful!"

"There are awful folks in this world."

"Yes—in the cities. 'Tain't so in the country. Read my book, 'Johnson's Rural By-ways an' Hedges,' an' you'll see it. The wickedest things in the country is that the women *will* go ter missionary meetings! I know one good soul who embezzled fifteen cents of a poor man's money, went ter the pet parson's missionary meetin', an' squandered all the money. The owner brought suit ter recover, an' it was found that the American agents stole fourteen cents on it, an' only one cent went ter Afrikay. A war-chief out thar used the cent ter buy whisky, an' the whisky killed him. The orig'nal owner o' the money had the war chief's club, it bein' the only assets ter kiver his loss. Strange things happen in the country!"

Old Cy appeared to have forgotten all about the Winchester case, and the girl's thoughts,

too, wandered. She again began to admire the ring with idolatrous admiration.

The old man did not monopolize her attention much longer, but prepared to go. On a former occasion he had left one of his books with her, and she had promised to pay the price if he kept his promise, and "threwed in a ring," as he expressed it.

Now, she had the ring and the book, but his wits must have been "wool-gathering," for he did not mention the matter of money. She did not think it necessary to refer to it, and the result was that he went away without any return for the glittering, but, really, cheap ring, and the invaluable agricultural work.

Clover Crookback toddled down the street in a meek and harmless way. His seedy garments, his uncared-for hair and beard, his disfiguring hump and his profusion of dirt did not make him a pleasant object to look upon; but when other pedestrians, seeing him approach, assumed the stony look put on for beggars, they were relieved to see him pass without a visible glance at them.

He made his way down-town, and ultimately brought up at the Bowery. There, fate ordained that he should have a hostile encounter, for Truman Nettle and a companion suddenly appeared in his path.

"Hold up!" Nettle brusquely ordered.

"Eh?" innocently returned Old Cy. "Oh! it's you, is it? my dear friend. Come 'round ter see the ol' man ag'in, hey? Mebbe you want ter buy a book—"

"You are our prisoner!"

"Hey?"

"I arrest you as a confederate of Steve Ridlon, and one of the murderers of Josiah Winchester!"

"You don't say so," replied Clover, with an air of mild astonishment. "How'd you find it out?"

"Then you admit it?"

"I hadn't never heard on't."

"You will hear of it now. Confound you! you are a dangerous cheat and humbug. You have for some time been under suspicion by the police, though we did not know just what to think of you. We were puzzled; I admit it. Now I have found a man who was one of the first at the Concord street fire, who asserts that you did not go into Winchester's house with the other men, but was inside when they entered; and he is ready to swear that he saw you filling your pockets with valuable articles."

"Sech as what?"

"The articles will be named in court."

"I hope so, 'cause I ain't no idee what they be. All this is new ter me, an' it nat'rally takes me by surprise. I always s'posed I was as wal posted on my own affairs as anybody else, but I see I ain't, an'—"

"You need make no more talk about it. You will have to go with us!"

Nettle laid a heavy hand upon Crookback's arm, but the latter did not appear to be discomposed in the least.

"All right, all right!" he agreed, cheerfully. "Of course I'll do anything you say ter 'commodate ye, fur me an' you has been ol' friends fur up'ards of a week. Afore we go, jest let me do my book a bit better—the kiver is all comin' off!"

Nettle relaxed his hold and permitted Old Cy to look out for his precious book. The wrapping-paper did seem somewhat disarranged, though not enough to reveal the book itself. Nettle's gaze wandered while his prisoner was thus occupied.

If he had watched closely he would have seen a sly twinkle in the old-man's eyes. Clover had an idea, and he put it into effect the moment that Nettle looked away.

Raising the alleged book aloft, and holding it firmly by each end, he suddenly and forcibly brought the flat side down upon the detective's head.

The result was surprising.

The alleged book tore apart, showing that there was no book there, and a box-like contrivance slid down over Truman's head to his shoulders, completely covering the aforesaid head from view, and as completely shutting off his own view.

Nettle's companion stared in amazement, while the detective frantically clawed at the novel blindfold, and only succeeded in tearing it off after a good deal of effort and some violent language.

Then he flashed a glance around.

"Where's Crookback?" he cried, furiously.

Sure enough—where was Old Cy? Truman's amateur aid had not thought to watch the prisoner, and the latter improved his chance to the utmost. He had gone, and, as the future proved, made good his escape. A long and persevering search on Nettle's part utterly failed to develop any signs of the suspected man.

CHAPTER XXXII.

THE OWNER OF THE COAT

A LABORING man was sitting in a plain room of his plain house, in Brooklyn, when a visitor called. There was no ceremony used on the

premises, and the caller was at once admitted. He bore a package in his hand.

If the laborer had been acquainted with Mr. Jacob Bradstreet he would have recognized the new-comer to be he, but he did not know the detective.

"I've come on a matter of business," observed Jacob, in a bluff, friendly way.

"Out with it, man!"

"I would like to ask if you ever saw this article."

The speaker whipped the wrapper off from the package, and, with a quick motion, spread out a coat. This he held up in front of the man of the house.

"Ever see it?" he added.

"Say, that's my coat!" was the surprised reply.

"Then why isn't it in your possession?"

"I lost it."

"How?"

"Well," the man answered, with a short, unconcerned laugh, "it was done in a racket. I belong to a boat-club, and we make things hum, sometimes. A few nights ago, I confess, we were out in our boat when we were all mighty full. Somehow—I don't know how—we had a row with some men in another boat, and either smashed their craft or turned it over. Then one of them yanked me out of the boat, and my coat was actually pulled off from me in the scrap. That's how I lost it!"

But little of this was new to Steady Hand. He had a very clear recollection of the trouble on the river, in which Zeb Oakes fought one of the other crew and secured his coat. The detective had patiently traced the matter until he learned to whom the coat belonged.

"So it was only a frolic?" he replied.

"A drunken racket!" frankly amended the man.

"I was with the other party."

"The dickens you were!"

"Yes."

"O' course you've come to get pay for your boat. Well, we'll pay you; it has been so voted by us."

"I will leave you to settle that with the owners of the other boat. What I want to ask you is, did you see anything peculiar on the river, just before you met us?"

Of course this question referred to the Water-Walker, but the boatman shook his head.

"We were all too drunk to see straight."

"You saw nothing else on the water?"

"Not a thing."

"Did you know you left one of your visiting cards in the coat?"

"My cards! I never had any printed."

"Then whose could it have been?"

"Blamed if I know! I may have taken it from somebody's place of business."

"Think carefully! It was in the inside pocket of the coat, and, probably, had not been there long. Now, go under the ground carefully, and see if you can remember."

"Whose name was on it?"

"That is what I want you to decide without seeing it."

In Bradstreet's pocket, at that moment, there reposed the card taken from the coat the night of the adventure. On one side was the printed name, "Alden Winchester," on the other was the single, penciled line: "Once inside, you know what to do!"

"I haven't the ghost of an idea. I often pick up business cards idly, and usually end by lighting my pipe with them. 'But a visiting-card—'"

The speaker stopped suddenly, a look of intelligence appeared on his face, and he ended a period of short, but deep, meditation, by exclaiming:

"Say, I have it!"

"Ah! what now?"

"I found that card in a car of the East River Bridge."

"When?"

"Let me see! Well, it was the night last week when it rained—the same night the house was burned on Concord street."

"Then you don't know who dropped the card?"

"Yes, I do. I saw the man who dropped it. He had a little package in his hand, and I think the card came out of that; at any rate, he was the one who dropped it. 'Twas when we were all leaving the car, and he didn't see it. I picked it up and touched his shoulder. 'Say, mister,' I began; but he only looked around, scowled at me like a pirate, and then turned his head away."

"Crabbed, eh?"

"The blamed snob thought I was a beggar. I had on my old clothes, and I know I ain't a dude in my face. Yes, he thought I was going to ask him for some money, and he looked that at me which was like the snarl of a dog. Lord! I just stopped short; if it had been a fifty-dollar note he would not have seen it again. I was just going to tear it up, but put it in my pocket, instead."

"Are you sure this was the card we found?"

"It must have been."

"Do you remember the name on it?"

"No. There was one, though, and on the opposite side was a line of writing. Let me see!"

—it was, 'You will know it when you see it,' or something like it."

"Once inside, you know what to do!"

"That was just it!" declared the boatman, slapping his hand upon his knee. "I remember that I thought it had a burglarious sound."

"Describe the man."

"Oh! he was a high-toned cove, about fifty-five years old; tall and slender, but pretty straight. He had black hair and whiskers, once, but they were getting a good bit streaked with silver."

"Did you see where he went after leaving the bridge station?"

"Yes, for my way home took me along in his tracks for a block. He turned to the left through Sands street, and was still going that way when I turned west through this street."

The net was closing around Alden Winchester. Crude as the description of him had been, it was enough to satisfy Bradstreet, and he had accumulated enough evidence to utterly refute the New Yorker's assertion that he had not been in Brooklyn the night of the tragedy.

Plainly he had been there, crossing first on the bridge and then returning by Fulton Ferry. How long he had remained was not clear, though the evidence of the deck-hand on the ferry-boat indicated that he had gone home previous to the discovery of the Concord street fire; but, in the mean while, according to Barnes's positive statement, he had met some corpulent man at the corner of Sands and Jay streets, giving him a key so that he could enter some certain house secretly.

"If you saw that man again, 'the detective went on, 'would you know him?"

"You bet!"

"Will you go now and identify him?"

"What's up?"

"Nothing dangerous to you."

"What if he forces a quarrel on me?"

"He will not even see you. I know where he is, and will give you a secret view."

The boatman arose.

"I'm your peppermint!" he declared.

"Come on, then!"

They left the house, and Steady Hand rapidly led the way toward the business part of the city. Having reason to believe that Alden Winchester would be at the Adams street station, he was determined to test his latest witness's confidence without delay.

When the place was reached all was highly favorable. Several men stood on the steps, and three of them were dressed in citizen's clothing, thus giving Winchester the benefit of every doubt, and subjecting him only to fair identification.

The detective was about to direct his man to pass the group, observe them critically but secretly, and thus divulge nothing to the object of suspicion, but close approach was not necessary.

"That's him!" the boatman declared.

"Which one?"

"The feller in the high hat."

It was Alden Winchester!

"I wish you to walk down past them," Bradstreet calmly directed, "and, without betraying any interest, observe your man nearer by. Then continue your walk, pass around the block, and meet me on the corner. Understand?"

The witness said that he did, and, after a few more cautions, Jacob sent him away. A few minutes later they met at the appointed place.

"That's the man!" declared the boatman.

"Would you swear to it?"

"Yes."

"You will probably have the chance!"

Bradstreet had no more to say to his companion, and, as soon as possible, he got rid of him. He was none too soon; Winchester was already approaching, having parted with his late companions, and the detective first evaded and then followed him to the Brooklyn house he had made his quarters, since the tragedy, when not in New York. Giving him a few minutes to get settled down, Jacob then rang the bell. When his name had been sent to the New Yorker he was promptly admitted and courteously received.

"I have not seen you lately, Mr. Winchester," observed the detective, quietly.

"No; I had wondered at your absence."

"Nettle has not made any arrest, I believe."

"No. May I ask if you have?"

"Not as yet. Are you still as anxious as ever to have your brother's murderer discovered?"

"Most certainly I am."

"Perhaps you can now remember what you were doing in Brooklyn the night of the tragedy?"

Winchester raised his brows in surprise, real or feigned.

"Have I not told you that I was not in Brooklyn that night?"

"You have, but others say that you were here!"

"They speak falsely, then."

"Are you sure? Mr. Winchester, many things are capable of proof which do not seem so. I ask you to think carefully, soberly, cautiously, before you repeat your statement!"

"It is not necessary," was the stern reply.

"I was not in Brooklyn that night!"

CHAPTER XXXIII.

THE HAUNTING FORM.

BRADSTREET bowed gravely.

"The issue is well-defined between us now, Mr. Winchester," he replied, soberly, "and, if I seem severe, you have only yourself to blame. You say that you were not in Brooklyn; I shall prove that you were!"

"Proceed!"

There was sarcasm in Alden Winchester's voice, but the detective thought that he was beginning to squirm on the hook, despite his bold front.

"I will proceed. On the evening of Josiah Winchester's murder you crossed from New York to Brooklyn, by means of the bridge cars. When you arose, at the end of your journey, you dropped a visiting-card which had your name upon it. A poorly-dressed man picked it up and touched your arm to return it, but, judging from your manner, you thought him a beggar. You gave him a severe glance; he became angry and said no more. He saw you leave the bridge-entrance and walk to the left through Sands street."

"Here in my pocket, Mr. Winchester, I have the card which you dropped. On one side is your name; on the other is a penciled line which reads: '*Once inside you know what to do!*'"

Bradstreet's gaze was fixed gravely, but searchingly, upon the New Yorker, and he was sure that the man's courage was shaken. Winchester, however, waved his hand composedly.

"Go on!" he directed.

"The man who would have given you back the card, at the time you dropped it, will swear that he saw all I have described."

"A case of mistaken identity?"

"We will see. Somewhat later two men stood and talked for awhile at the corner of Sands and Jay streets. You have already heard Mr. Barnes assert that one was you."

"He was in error."

"Later, you returned home, but not by the bridge. A third witness will swear that you went over the Fulton Ferry!"

"Rubbish!"

"A fourth witness will swear that you returned home about wet through, that night, and that your garments were dried by the kitchen fire. Moreover, in conversation with your wife, you admitted that you had been in Brooklyn—"

"What! have you bought up a witness in my own household?" demanded Winchester fiercely.

"Enough that I can prove all I assert."

"I say you have been imposed upon, or else you have deliberately plotted to ruin me!"

The detective bowed.

"The last resort of cornered guilt is to personal abuse," he answered, without the least show of anger.

"Will you believe all these lies?"

"Can I be blind to all this proof?"

"It is not proof; it is a plan to ruin me."

"Who is the plotter?"

Possibly the New Yorker wished to heap the accusation upon the detective; possibly he did not dare to do it.

"You ought to know your witnesses," he finally returned.

"I think I do; I believe that they are persons who are honest in all that they say. Do you see how their testimony places you?"

"If it were true, it would place me badly."

"Mr. Winchester, nine men out of ten, situated as I am, would have come here, not to talk with, but to arrest you!"

The New Yorker looked soberly at his companion, and seemed to study his expression.

"If you have not come with that object, why do you refrain?"

"There are some men to whom it is only justice to give a chance. You may not be a fratricide, and if you are not, no one would hail the proof with more pleasure than myself. This is why I have come to you as I have. Despite the strong proof; despite the fact that it is proved you were in Brooklyn that night, when you declare that you were not, you may be able to explain your way out. If you can, I hope, for your own sake, that you will do it."

If Winchester felt any doubts and fears, his composure was remarkable. Bradstreet thought there were signs of a struggle—of a wavering, an apprehension—but his reply was steady.

"Bradstreet, I am persuaded that you mean well, but you are wholly at sea. All of your deductions are wrong, and your witnesses are either equally deceived, or unconscionable villains."

"Then you refuse—"

"Wait a second! I am pained and troubled by the want of success in discovering my brother's murderer, for every day seems to lessen the chance of bringing him to justice. To be frank, I have lost all faith in Truman Nettle. He has been dallying with theories, and has made no advance. I would be glad to pay you handsomely to catch the guilty wretch, but, instead of hunting him, you seem to be acting upon the theory that I am the murderer. Imagine my position!"

"You say you would employ me to find the man?"

"Yes."

"Would you, then," Steady Hand sternly

asked, "bind my hands by persisting in your false statement?"

A hot reply seemed to tremble on Winchester's lips, but he forced it back.

"I am afraid you and I cannot agree," he returned, gravely.

"You are right."

The detective abruptly rose and moved to the door.

"Perhaps I can accommodate you by revealing the murderer sooner than you think, but, whether the result proves your own innocence or the reverse, you will deserve no credit!"

There was some response from Winchester, but Jacob did not wait to hear it. He was greatly annoyed by the situation, and was about to close the door behind him, when the New Yorker prevented this by himself placing a hand on it.

"I trust that we do not part as enemies," he added.

"In my business, I cannot afford to stoop to enmity, sir."

"I am sorry that you doubt me, but you will find that all I have said is true. I thank you for your confidence, and assure you that I shall not run away."

The last words were jokingly spoken, and accompanied by a smile, but they provoked a quick retort from the Detective Napoleon.

"I am well aware of that, sir. I have not laid my case before you, only to give you a chance to flee—if flee you should wish. I should be a dolt to do that. No, Mr. Winchester, I do not fear that you will run away. From this time until the mystery is solved, your every movement will be watched. Go where you will, keen eyes will be upon you. Whether you walk, or drive, or sleep, or eat, every movement will be visible to a certain man who will follow you like a shadow, as patiently as an Indian trailer, as remorseless as fate! Good-day, sir!"

At last a shot had been sent home. Emotions of various kinds chased each other over Winchester's face, and his color changed like that of a diffident school-girl.

He had been deeply touched, but was saved the necessity of a reply. At the last word Bradstreet wheeled abruptly and left the house.

Winchester started to open the outside door again, not to call the late visitor back, but to follow an impulse and watch him out of sight. He resisted the inclination and returned to the room he had just left.

Whatever the cause, he had been left in an excited, nervous mood. Perhaps he had with difficulty kept on a mask of composure—however that may have been, he was no longer calm.

He stood for a moment and looked around in a half-frightened way; then he laughed unnaturally, as though making an effort to fight down his fears.

The attempt was not a success, and he began to pace the room in a quick, nervous way, his head lowered in thought, his brows contracted.

For perhaps ten minutes he kept this up, and then went to the window. That invaluable adjunct of secrecy, lace curtains, was there, and, standing concealed by them, he peered out.

Moving somewhat, he looked up the street and down the street, but saw no one except two or three innocent-looking pedestrians.

A ray of hope crossed his face, and, after meditating for awhile, he took his hat and left the house. He walked briskly for a block, looking straight ahead, and then, under a pretense of gazing at some goods in a show-window, turned suddenly and looked back.

A slender, keen-faced young man was coming toward him, but as he paused, the young man halted and became very much interested in a second show-window.

After a little while Winchester went on. He took an erratic course, turning several corners, and then looked back.

The young man was still following him.

Perspiration suddenly broke out on Winchester's forehead. He had left the house to test the detective's assertion that, go where he might, he would be followed and watched, and the result alarmed him. Innocent or guilty, whichever he might be, he was a suspected man, and there is something terrible in being thus dogged.

He knew it then, if never before.

To settle the matter beyond question, he kept on for an hour. Wherever he went, the haunting form followed. He dared not resort to any trick to escape, for it would do no good then, and might be regarded as an evidence of guilt.

He simply knew that he was under espionage, and he was in a panic when he reached his Brooklyn home.

Entering his private room he found a sealed envelope on the table. He opened it, and found a note with one line, only, of writing. It was as follows:

"*Jared has died suddenly, of heart-disease!*"

The reader turned ghastly pale and staggered back.

"Lost!" he gasped, huskily. "My God! I am doomed!"

CHAPTER XXXIV.

CITY TRAILS, AND TRAIL-HUNTERS.

AT Jacob Bradstreet's house there were frequent calls for him. The first had come early in the morning when a young man, giving his name as James Blake, had appeared and, in an excited manner, asked to see the detective. He did not succeed.

Bradstreet was absent, and his wife could give no further information than that he had gone out very early, leaving word that she need not be surprised if he did not return for a day or two, although he was liable to appear at any time.

The caller had left this note:

"MR. BRADSTREET:—Please come to us at once, for we are again in trouble. My mother was not at the house when we returned—she, too, has strangely disappeared. We do not know what to make of it, or where to look, and your strong mind and experience are needed. We are nearly distracted, and I beg that you will come at once, on receipt of this, if only to give us advice. JAMES BLAKE."

This document was left, but the detective did not return, and he remained ignorant of the new complication in the Blake household.

Twice, during the forenoon, James again called, worried and excited, and eager to see Jacob, but he called in vain. The detective did not return, and no word came from him. As his absence was in exact accord with the information he had given his wife, there was nothing strange about this, but, to young Blake, the delay was most painful.

There was grief and fear in the Hicks street home, and the only man in whom they had confidence was not to be found.

It was a building in New York which had seen its best days. Buildings, like men, grow old and rusty, and there are many in the American metropolis that look as though they were past their prime when navigator Hudson sailed in the adjacent waters and immortalized his name in the noble stream which is the main artery to the heart of New York State.

Entering the particular building mentioned, one would find a grim old hall, a grim old stairway, and a dark, uncomfortable hall above. If he examined the several doors which opened from it he would have found, upon one, this sign:

"RURIC DEMIDOFF,

"RUSSIAN SWORDMASTER.

"Instruction at Reasonable Rates."

All these things were seen by a man who, on the same day when James Blake was vainly searching for the detective, entered the old building. He knocked at the door which bore the sign; a voice bade him enter; he obeyed.

Ruric Demidoff was seated at a desk, and his room was like an arsenal. Swords of all kinds were there, from the neat and insinuating rapier to the clumsy cutlass; and there, too, were rifles, revolvers, dumb-bells, boxing-gloves, and an endless variety of things which would interest a sporting man.

The Russian skipped out of his chair agilely, and bowed with remarkable politeness.

"Your servant, sir—your servant!" he declared.

"This is Mr. Demidoff, I presume?"

"That is my name, sir; yes, sir."

"And you teach men to use those?"

The visitor pointed to the array of swords. Ruric smiled slightly at the other's crude way of expressing himself, but bowed very low.

"That is my profession, sir."

"Do you think that I could learn?"

The Russian looked more critically at the visitor. He saw a young man with white hands, stylish clothes and the air of a gentleman, but he also noticed that there was a remarkably compact, well-rounded form inside the clothes.

"Bravo!" he replied; "you certainly have all the primary qualities. You have health and strength, and your long arms would give you great reach. I make bold to say you would be a promising pupil. May I ask your name and business?—if you are in business."

"My name is Jacobs, and I am a clerk. Two days hence my vacation begins. I do not want to idle it away, as usual, in flirting with empty-headed girls at the seaside. I have taken a fancy to perfect myself in manly arts, and I think I should like using the sword best of all. Having heard of you from a former pupil, one Ambrose Legrand—"

"Ah! you come from Legrand?" cried Ruric.

"Yes."

"Hal—aha! Now, indeed, am I glad to see you; I know Legrand well, and am glad to see his friends. You do well to take up the manly pursuits, and the use of the sword is the king of them all! My life! but there is nothing like it; you cannot imagine the pleasure in one's soul when two glittering blades kiss each other, and recoil from the lingering contact with a hiss like that of two serpents. *Mon Dieu!* it is grand!"

The swordmaster threw up his arms in an ecstasy of delight, and was like a buoyant boy. Jacobs, as the would-be pupil had seen fit to

call himself, spoke further, and, through chance or design, increased the good impression he had already made. He flattered Demidoff, admired his collection, and, in every way, made himself so agreeable that the impulsive foreigner was ready to take the visitor to his heart.

"I am told that you are a good deal of a waterman, too," Jacobs finally observed.

"No, no; I am a poor sailor."

"But Legrand said you were near the water a good deal."

"We may well aim to perfect ourselves in all things."

"True. Well, I am an amateur sailor, and feel a good deal of interest in such matters. I am even trying to improve the motive power of steam crafts, hoping to get a patent which will bring me in some money."

Demidoff shook his head.

"New things are hard to make."

"An ingenious man like you ought not to say that."

The Russian darted a quick glance at his visitor.

"How do you know I am ingenious?"

"Legrand intimated that you were concerned in some patents, and said that, perhaps, you would tell me about them."

A scowl appeared on Demidoff's face, and he looked more suspiciously at Jacobs than ever.

"He said that?"

"Yes," replied Jacobs, with a careless smile.

"How dared he? What does he know about it?"

"I had the impression that he was in your confidence, though he would not admit it. He said that you were interested in new patents, but he gave me no clew."

Ruric looked relieved.

"Legrand is wrong; he is too imaginative; his fancy runs away with him. Patents? Bosh! there is no money in them; the capitalist robs the poor inventor. I did plan to form a new sword, which should be so perfect that it would supersede all others, and fill their places in one perfect weapon. But, nonsense! I shall carry it no further—the rich men with capital shall not rob me!"

"Possibly you are right," Jacobs agreed, "though I shall not give up my idea; I shall get it patented when perfected—if it ever reaches that point. Well, Mr. Demidoff, I should like to make arrangements to take lessons in the use of the sword, beginning about three days hence."

The Russian's swarthy face at once became smiling, and he plunged into business. He would be charmed to teach Mr. Jacobs—absolutely charmed; and the lessons could begin at any time.

Attention was given to details. Jacobs was very particular as to the financial terms, stating that he had no great amount of money; and he looked over the swords, and asked various questions such as would occur to an amateur.

When arrangements were duly made he left the place. Taking a direct course he walked three blocks, and then met another man on the corner.

"Well?" questioned the latter, laconically.

"No good!" Jacobs answered.

"Did you see him?"

"Yes, and found him as sly as a fox."

"Couldn't you pump him?"

"Not in the least. The first attempt put him on his guard, and I soon sheered off. I read the man, and knew that it would be folly to talk with him."

"I'll bet, though, that he did not suspect that you were Bradstreet, the detective."

"He did not," replied Demidoff's late visitor; "at least, I saw no signs of suspicion. Of course he had the instinct of caution very strongly, for he was inclined to receive me very cordially, as Legrand's friend. From this newly-formed acquaintance I could undoubtedly work up something, if I had the time, but I hope to nip our game without that amount of delay."

Evening!

Four persons approached a house in the suburbs of Brooklyn. They first reconnoitered carefully, and then decided that there was but one way to leave the house. That was by the front door.

This being decided upon, they boldly advanced to the entrance.

Of this quartette one was James Blake; the second was Dudley Leland; and the other two were officers in plain clothes.

A hard-faced colored woman answered the bell when they rung.

"Woman, we have come to relieve you of a tenant," said one of the officers, brusquely.

"Hey?"

"You are holding a lady prisoner here. We want her at once!"

"What's that?" was the surprised response.

"There ain't nobody here at all—"

The officer spread a paper out before her gaze.

"Do you see that?" he demanded.

"Looks like a search-warrant."

"I see you've been there before! Well, it is a search warrant, and we are coming in to look your premises over."

"Why, of course; come right in. I haven't the least idea what you want, or are talking about; but the house is open to you. Walk right in!"

They were about to obey this invitation, when hurried steps sounded on the sidewalk, and another man came up at a trot.

"Say, we're too late!" he announced, out of breath. "The woman has been spirited away—"

"Oh!" interrupted the negress, easily; "do you mean the lady who was here? Well, she did go, some time ago."

"I have definite news. Follow me at once!" the messenger added.

"Better search this house first," advised Leland. "We may be the victims of a sharp trick."

"The house is open to you," politely urged the colored woman.

"We will search it!"

The leading officer spoke emphatically, and they entered. The place was not large, and but little time was consumed in the work. Really, it was the place where Mrs. Hannah Blake had been imprisoned, but the room to which we have seen her conducted was then vacant.

Wherever she was they had come too late—she had been spirited away.

CHAPTER XXXV.

THE DOUBLE FIGHT.

THE search of the house established the fact that Mrs. Blake was not there, but one of the officers, while he made no comments, had seen enough to satisfy him that the second-story room had lately held a prisoner. He was of the opinion that the captors would be called to account before many days, but he ignored the hypocritical speeches of the colored woman, and her show of friendliness when she tried to tell an elaborate story.

The searchers left the house, and then the late messenger told his story.

He had been following a branch of the trail, according to orders, and had heard that a woman was to be taken across the water to New Jersey soil, and his informant had heard her referred to by the name of "Blake."

The removal was to be made by means of a boat, and the craft and the boatman were even then waiting for their employers and the prisoner to appear.

This appeared to be proof enough, and they ordered a carriage, entered, and were hurried away toward the given locality. When at a safe distance they left the vehicle and, going nearer on foot, investigated the situation.

A boat could be seen at the water's edge, with several men loitering near, but there was no available way of approaching as near as they wished.

"Who knows this vicinity?" asked the leader.

"I do," answered the recent messenger.

"Is there any way by which we can get on the further side of them, and be sure of cutting off their escape by water?"

"Nothing could be easier. We can get another boat and lie-to in the middle of the cove; then, when they start, we shall be right in their course."

"Excellent. Let us get the position, and nothing can save them."

"I want to thank you, sir," observed James, as they started off, "for the efforts you have used in this case—"

"Don't mention it: Bradstreet told me to do my best, and that's what I'm trying to do."

"May I ask if you and Steady Hand are partners?"

"We are not, but he frequently sends customers to me when he is busy. I presume that's his position now."

Blake had good reason to believe that such was the fact. After repeated calls for the detective he had found him and told of his mother's disappearance, but Jacob had said that it was utterly impossible for him to attend to the work.

James had received the impression that Bradstreet was not on the trail of the murderers of Josiah Winchester, but nothing had been admitted.

Bradstreet had referred the troubled son to another detective, and the latter had taken the case so zealously that he believed success would soon reward them. The abduction of Mrs. Blake, successful as it had been, had, really, been a clumsy piece of work, and far less difficulty had been found in tracing her than was to be expected, when once an experienced man was in charge.

After the foregoing conversation, the party made a slight detour, to escape observation, and approached the place where a boat was usually to be engaged. The present occasion was no exception to the rule; the boat and its owner were found; and it did not take long to engage it and row out on the water.

They were in a little bay, or cove, which reminded Dudley and James of their Staten Island experience. The marine entrance was small, and easily guarded, and when the would-be rescuers had taken position there, they felt that it would be impossible for the enemy to run the blockade.

Looking back, they could see a low, circling shore, and the lights of the scattered houses beyond. The other boat, and the waiting crew, were not to be seen.

Their coming was impatiently awaited.

Half an hour passed, and no sign came from the abductors. Silence had been enjoined upon the second crew, but James grew nervous.

"I am becoming alarmed," he observed, in a low voice.

"Why?"

"What is the reason they don't come? Can it be that they have changed their plan, and gone elsewhere?"

"Not unless they know of our pursuit."

"If they were coming here, why didn't they arrive ahead of us?"

"You'd better ask that of them," gruffly replied the late messenger. "Young fellow, I haven't built up my case by chance. She was taken away from the house of a sudden, but they were not ready to cross to Jersey. When they are, probably they will come!"

This curt reply made James feel that he ought to apologize, and he was about to do so when a startled exclamation fell from the lips of the owner of the boat.

"Thunderation! what's that?" he cried.

"The Water-Walker!" Dudley quickly added.

He was right. Once again, with the absence of "rhyme and reason" which always appeared to mark his movements, the nautical wonder was abroad. This time the strange white light was shining, and he was walking along with his usual deliberation in the illuminated circle.

There was nothing new in the sight to Leland or Blake, but the boatman, and one or two of the party who had never heard of the object, gazed in dumfounded wonder.

"It's the Evil One, sure pop!" exclaimed one.

"He's come ter get you, Sam!"

"I'll buy him off—he must be hard up, or he would not come on foot. Hello!"

The bright light suddenly vanished, and the Water-Walker seemed to have gone with it, but as they became accustomed again to the semi-darkness, he was seen walking ahead with calm dignity of manner.

"That beats my time!" declared one of the observers.

Just then the sound of oars reached their hearing, and they turned their faces toward the open water. Another boat was to be seen, its course being toward them, and its position only a few yards distant.

The same question occurred to each man, What craft was it? Plainly, it could not be the one for which they were waiting, for its course was toward, not away from, the cove.

Thus far they had not been seen in return, the recess in which they had been lying to avoid the notice of the kidnappers being equally effective on the opposite side, but it was clear that complications might follow. The strange boat and the Water-Walker were alike moving toward the point where the kidnappers would start, and the latter might thereby be alarmed.

At first the strange craft seemed to be moving slowly, for the oars made but little sound, but a more critical survey revealed the fact that this was owing principally to the fact that the oars were used with remarkable skill.

Really, the boat was moving rapidly, and following straight after the Water-Walker.

Suddenly the situation became critical. Other oars sounded, and, looking up, they saw a third boat moving out of the cove.

It was the kidnappers and their prisoner!

They had been temporarily forgotten in the rush of strange events, and had made their start without creating notice. Now, matters were in a complicated way, the three boats and the Water-Walker being thrown into a narrow arena, each with a different part to play.

"Give way!" ordered the leader of the rescuers, and their own boat moved out of the recess.

Of course they were at once seen by the strangers, for only a few yards separated them, but neither sounded a hail. Straight in the wake of the Water-Walker went the unknown, while the rescuers bore down upon the kidnappers.

The latter were not long in discovering the other voyagers, and there was perceptible hesitation on their part, but, after a brief delay, they came on.

Evidently, they did not think that an enemy was likely to be at that point.

But this was not all. Their course had been directly toward the Water-Walker, and he had turned back to avoid them. It was not an encouraging view which met his gaze—he was in the middle of a circle bounded by the three boats, and every one was sweeping toward him.

Clearly, something exciting was to be expected.

"Have your revolvers ready!" ordered the chief detective in the rescue-party. "Do not fire if you can avoid it, and then look out whom you hit!"

"My mother is there!" suddenly exclaimed James, in a concentrated voice.

There was but little time to say more. The boats continued to converge, and the kidnappers must have realized then that the situation

had a meaning. The rescuers were directly in their path, and barring the way to escape. How the former intended to act was soon seen—they bore down on the rival craft at full speed.

"Out of the way!" shouted one of the crew.

"Edlock!" exclaimed Dudley Leland.

James could see, and, at last, really recognized his mother, and he started to rise, but a more thoughtful head, impelling a strong hand, forced him back.

"Brace yourself for the shock!" ordered the detective.

It came quickly; the two boats met like engines in a collision, and a crashing of wood showed that one, or both, had suffered severely.

The shock was sufficient to send several of the occupants sprawling, but there was little recoil. At just the right moment the officers had grasped the kidnappers' boat, and the two were held side by side.

Another moment and the rescuers leaped to the attack. James had been specially instructed to look to his mother, but the others went on different work.

They sprung upon the kidnappers, and, seeing that they intended to fight, rained blow after blow upon them. All were soon mixed up in a general fight.

Young Blake remembered his instructions, and carried them out in an admirable manner. His mother was half-fainting, and he raised and carried her to the other boat without delay.

At that moment, when his mind was in a completely demoralized state, something drew his gaze to another point. He saw a peculiar scene.

Not forty feet away the Water-Walker was moving with long steps, while, close at his heels, the third boat was pursuing him with remarkable speed. Suddenly some misfortune seemed to assail him, and his advance was checked. He sunk in the water to his waist, and struggled as though some monster of the sea was dragging him down.

Then the pursuing boat reached his side, and a man leaned over and seized him.

James saw the fugitive turn and raise his arm—then came a flash, and the report of a revolver.

If any one had been hurt by his murderous attempt there was no sign of it, and, a moment later, he was drawn into the boat by the united efforts of two of its occupants.

The Water-Walker was captured!

Suddenly two men fell at Blake's feet, coming from the kidnappers' craft, and, after squirming like animals in combat, one gained the mastery and sat upright.

"Here's our old friend, Edlock!" observed the cool voice of Dudley Leland.

James gazed at the author of their troubles in speechless anger, but the last blow of the fight had been struck. Two of the kidnappers were prisoners, and the others had made their escape by leaping out of the boat.

This seemed to be a matter of small importance. When the rescue of Mrs. Blake was remembered, James was supporting his mother, and she was gradually recovering from her fright and nervous collapse.

After a few random remarks the attention of nearly all the party wandered. The tide was carrying the two remaining boats nearer each other, and there appeared to be mutual curiosity.

Suddenly a hail came from the second craft.

"Hallo, there! I did not think to find acquaintances here, but chance plays strange cards. I think, Blake, that you have made a 'find.' Well, so have I!"

"Bradstreet!" Leland exclaimed.

"With a distinguished passenger, was the light reply. "Did you see us rope in the Water-Walker?"

"Have you solved the mystery?" eagerly asked Leland.

"Yes. I had the tip that our nautical friend was to be here, to-night, and I laid for him with the result which you have seen."

"Much good may it do you!" snarled a voice from Bradstreet's boat. "You will never know the secret of my ability to walk on the water!"

"The fellow has destroyed his marvelous seven-league boots," admitted the detective, calmly, "but we have him, if not in his shoe-leather. Look at the weird pedestrian!"

He turned the slide of a dark-lantern, and the light fell upon the scowling face of Ruric Demidoff!

CHAPTER XXXVI.

WHAT THEY FOUND.

THE scene was the old, familiar one at the Brooklyn station-house which the reader has already visited several times. The characters were the captain of the precinct; Jacob Bradstreet; two officers, and a man who was in their charge as a prisoner—Ruric Demidoff.

The wrists of the Russian swordmaster were confined by irons.

"What is your name?" asked the captain.

"Ruric Demidoff."

Other formal questions followed, to make the official record, and then the captain continued: "You are the man who has been doing the

surprising feat of walking on the water, are you not?"

"Since the proof is absolute I will not deny it, but"—with a menacing glance toward Bradstreet—"no one will profit by my invention. My means of locomotion was so constructed that I could destroy it at will, and I did so when the police dogs set out to capture me."

"We care nothing about it," the captain answered, indifferently. "Of course you were shod with some buoyant substance, shaped into shoes, which enabled you to walk as you did. Keep your secret, for all of me. What we have to say is of a different nature."

"Demidoff, for several days you have been under police surveillance—or, more properly, under that of Mr. Bradstreet, the detective—"

"He is a dog!" cried Demidoff, furiously. "He came to me in my studio, and said that his name was Jacobs, and that he was a clerk!"

"He has been near you at other times. He has watched you and your movements; he has interviewed men who knew you; he has investigated your deeds of the last fortnight. Perhaps you can surmise what he has learned?"

"I know not—I care not!" snarled the Russian.

"Have you no statement to make?"

"None!"

"We shall not urge you; it is a matter which interests you more than any one else. We will give you five minutes for consideration. At the end of that time, if you do not see fit to speak, you will be returned to your cell."

The captain turned away, but Demidoff hurled after him the retort:

"I will not speak!"

No one answered him.

When the time was up the captain quietly arose.

"What is your decision?" he asked.

"I have nothing to say; I defy you all!" sharply declared the Russian.

"Take him to his cell!"

While the order was being obeyed the captain turned to Steady Hand.

"Do you move at once?" he asked.

"Immediately!"

"The men are at your disposal."

"Thanks, and—good-day!"

The detective went out. In another room three men were waiting who had been told to obey him in all things. He directed them to follow him, and all four left the station. They walked away at a brisk pace.

Down toward the Navy Yard there is a locality which, certainly, could not be called the aristocratic part of Brooklyn. It was before a house in this quarter that Bradstreet and his companions finally paused.

Not one of them had ever been there before, but they were able to dispense with the ceremony of ringing, and saw fit to do so. Jacob produced a key which he applied to the door. A turn of his wrist moved back the bolt, and a satisfied expression appeared on his face.

The key had been taken from Ruric Demidoff's pocket, and it was an experiment when the detective used it.

The result, however, was satisfactory to the party.

He opened the door and they entered. Each man had his revolver ready, but they did not expect to meet an enemy at once. As they crossed the threshold, however, they saw a big easy-chair in the hall, and, sitting in it, was a man who was fast asleep. Slight as were the sounds they made, it was enough to arouse him, and he sprang up as though operated by machinery.

He came up, too, holding a revolver in his hand, and his appearance might well have created alarm—his face was coarse and brutal in the extreme, and a ferocious light shone from his eyes.

Bradstreet read the man at a glance, and realized how he should be properly dealt with. One quick motion sent the hostile weapon flying across the hall, and then Jacob thrust his own revolver under the man's nose.

"In the name of law, surrender!" he commanded.

The man was bold and reckless. The revolver had no visible terrors for him, and he threw up his hand to grasp the detective's wrist. Bradstreet had half-expected the movement, and he acted accordingly. With a quick blow from the shoulder, he knocked the rough down with his left hand.

Before the fallen man could rise the three officers had pounced upon him, and his wrists were quickly ironed; but the sound of his fall had reached other ears.

A door opened, and out came two women, old, ugly and dangerous-looking.

Even with them it would, evidently, not do to deal tenderly, and they were awed to silence by a liberal show of revolvers, and made prisoners.

"Who else is in the house?" Bradstreet asked.

"Nobody," glibly answered one of the women.

"We will see."

No one would be foolish enough to believe their statements, and, leaving them and the man in charge of two of the officers, Jacob and his remaining assistant went about the search. The

lower floor did not yield a single person or a discovery. They ascended to that above.

The first door opened gave them an inkling to revelations to come. Although broad daylight was at hand as an illuminator, the curtains of the windows were drawn, and gas was burning. By its light, Bradstreet saw a woman—the supply seemed greater than the demand—sitting by a bed, while upon the latter was the form of a pallid, haggard old man.

The last discovery was unexpected, and the old man looked to be so near to death that the detective's gentler feelings were aroused. He paused, but the gaze of the sick man was upon him, and that person suddenly held up two emaciated hands.

"Save me!—save me!" he exclaimed, in a voice which would have been shrill with emotion had it not been subdued by weakness.

"Some new devilry!" muttered Bradstreet's companion, while Jacob quickly advanced.

"Rest easy, sir," he answered; "we are detectives, and if you are the victim of persecution, you shall be saved."

"I am a prisoner here—a kidnapped man, dying in the hands of these fiends!" almost wailed the old man.

"Be calm! You are now safe."

The detective bent a severe glance upon the woman jailer. She had not the brazen courage of her confederates below, and was shaking with fear.

"Send for my friends!" persisted the old man, feverishly. "I am rich, and I can reward you well. Yes, yes; I will pay you all what is right?"

"Are you a Brooklyn man?"

"Yes, yes!"

"And your name—"

"Is Josiah Winchester!"

Silence followed this announcement, for Bradstreet was utterly dumfounded. He had followed the trail until he thought that he knew all about the Concord street tragedy, but not for a moment had he suspected that Josiah Winchester was alive.

"I was kidnapped by a gang of ruffians, of whom one Ruric Demidoff was the leader," went on the sick man, rapidly, and with unnatural strength. "They came to my house at dead of night, and I awoke to find them in my room. I resisted all that I could, and Demidoff, thinking that I was going to give the alarm, struck at me with a knife; but he hit one of his own men instead, and killed him instantly. They left the body there, set fire to the house, and then took me away."

Steady Hand knew at last whose body had been found in the ruin. The work of the fire had rendered positive identification out of the question, but those who knew Josiah Winchester best had never suspected the truth.

"The gang that took me here are regular outlaws," the narrator proceeded; "they kidnap rich men, and hold them for a ransom. That's why they seized me, but I was injured that night, and have been very near to death. Demidoff stabbed me in the side, and the wound is killing me. I am afraid that I shall die—Oh! save me, save me! and I'll pay you well. I'm rich, and I will pay you well!"

The old man's voice had risen louder and louder, but now his strength gave way and he fell back in a swoon.

CHAPTER XXXVII.

LIGHT IN DARK PLACES.

As proudly as though he had conquered the old Roman Empire in true Alaric style, Mr. Truman Nettle trod the street, and conducted a prisoner to the receptacle for malefactors. A man stood there whom he did not at once see, so lofty was his regard, but the former made himself seen and heard.

"Deary me, Mr. Nettle, what terrible feller hev you got now?"

Nettle condescended to drop his eyes. He saw old Clover Crookback, and then he frowned darkly.

"You shall soon know, old man," he severely replied. "I command you not to leave this place!"

Nettle spoke in an imperious way, and then pushed forward his prisoner to the notice of the officer in charge.

"Captain," he loudly proclaimed, "I desire you to lock up this man. I charge him with being the murderer of Josiah Winchester!"

"Ah! who is he?"

"Steve Ridlon, the well-known burglar."

"What is the proof against him?"

"The job was just in his line, and a man who looked like him was seen near the house a day or two before the murder."

"Is there no further evidence?"

"Well—a—not as yet, but I shall proceed to get it."

"Is there a charge of other crimes against him?"

"No."

"Then we shall have to let him go, for this charge falls flat. Ridlon cannot have killed Winchester, for Winchester is not dead!"

Nettle's lower jaw fell, and he stared in blank amazement and silence.

"I would suggest," added the captain, with

some sarcasm, "that you take a few lessons of Clover Crookback, the book-agent. Possibly he would like an aid."

"Why do you mention that old rascal to me?"

"Because it is he who has found Josiah Winchester, and arrested the guilty parties in the case. All is tolerably clear, and we are able to say that Ridlon was not in it. Bradstreet has beaten you, Nettle!"

"Bradstreet! How many men are to be credited with the success of the job?"

The captain and Clover Crookback exchanged a meaning glance, and then the latter suddenly pulled off his hat, a wig and a false beard, and Jacob Bradstreet stood revealed!

If Nettle had been surprised before, he was now utterly dumfounded.

"Mr. Nettle," quietly observed Jacob, "when a certain lady fainted on Washington street, and I acted a humane part toward her, you observed with a sneer that I would, perhaps, get a clew thereby. I told you that, if I did, you should hear of it. Now, sir, I announce that my success began with that very occasion."

"But you—you—how can you be Clover Crookback? I have seen him and you together, more than once."

"My dear sir, I have an assistant in my work, a bright young man whom I find quite useful. I decline to make our methods public, but will state that Clover Crookback lives only in fancy, and that, since you have known him, I have worn the disguise a part of the time, and my aid has been Old Cy at all other times!"

As he spoke, Bradstreet unbuttoned the ragged coat and threw it aside. The disfiguring hump went with it. Nettle turned almost meekly to the captain.

"Is all this true?" he asked.

"Yes."

"And the guilty parties are under arrest?"

"Yes."

"Then I have no more to say!"

Releasing Steve Ridlon without ceremony, the discomfited man-catcher turned and hurried away.

Half an hour later Bradstreet called at the house where Alden Winchester made his headquarters when in Brooklyn, and was soon in the latter's presence. The New Yorker looked agitated, but Jacob ignored the fact and bowed politely.

"You sent for me, Mr. Winchester."

"I did, sir. Do you remember how my note was expressed?"

"It read, 'If you come to me, I will make an important statement.'"

"You are right, sir; but, since then I have received strange news. I am told that my brother has been found alive!"

"Such is the fact. Josiah Winchester lives, although he is a very ill man."

"Has he—has he made any statement of interest, outside of his late adventures?"

"He has stated," Bradstreet bluntly replied, "that he has a legal wife in a lady known as Mrs. Hannah Blake, and that her children are his."

"Did he say legal wife?"

"He did," Steady Hand answered.

"Then he greatly deceived me in the past?"

"So he has told me."

"I knew of the Blakes," excitedly confessed Winchester, "but I did not think they were related to him by law; he had always told me otherwise. Mr. Bradstreet, you must think me a villain to have denied all knowledge in the past, but I did what I thought was best for them. From the first I was determined that they should never know that Thomas Blake and Josiah Winchester was one. They had never doubted the legality of the marriage, and, for their sake, and for my brother's, I resolved to keep the truth from them. For them to know what I believed to be true would ruin their future happiness, and it would ruin my brother's reputation. Before Heaven, I was sincere in my position. Some personal and family pride may have influenced me, but my chief thought was of them and my brother's good name. I had resolved to secretly convey my brother's money to them later, but even when James Blake came to me, I denied his claim. I even destroyed some evidence—as, for instance, Josiah's picture—which I feared would enable them to prove their claims. I intended to avert scandal at all hazards. In this I may have been wrong."

He paused for a moment, and then rapidly resumed:

"Your witnesses were right in saying that I was in Brooklyn that night; I was here. I was the man seen at the corner of Jay and Sands streets, my companion being Jared Norley, an old family servant. Knowing that the Blakes were poor and needy—their landlord in Hicks street was my friend—I determined to send them presents. I did so, Jared carrying them there secretly. I gave him a key to the house so he could enter unseen. The 'cans' referred to in our talk were cans of preserves for Mrs. Blake. I knew that you were collecting evidence against me, but I relied on Jared to help me out if it became serious. I had one scare

just after you left me the last time. Jared fell in a swoon—from which, happily, he has recovered—but, while he lay insensible, thinking he was dead, his aged wife sent me a message saying he died of heart-disease. Imagine my terror—I thought that the only witness who could save me was swept away."

The New Yorker passed his hand nervously across his face.

"I was in that mood," he added, "when I sent you the last brief note—I had determined to tell you all I knew, and show *why* I was in Brooklyn that night."

"I believe all that you have said," Bradstreet gravely replied, "but your devotion to your principles would have landed you in a prison-cell if I had not had some doubts."

"And my brother's enemies—who were they?"

"A gang led by one Ruric Demidoff. They abducted your brother to make you pay ransom money, but the time had not come to communicate with you. I learned of Demidoff early in the game, but saw no reason to suspect him for some time. He had, however, secured one of your cards, and his carelessness in leaving it in a shooting-gallery, where he performed several feats, led me to look him up. Once on his track, evidence came in fast."

"Are you sure of his guilt?"

"My evidence is proved by your brother's own statement. Demidoff came over that night, taking the cars of the New York Elevated Road at Fourteenth street, and then crossing by the big bridge. On each line, people near him smelled kerosene and wondered at his size around the waist. The smell of kerosene was chance, and not of importance. His unusual size was partly the deliberate result of an effort to disguise himself, but he also carried under his coat the shoes which he used in walking on the water; the latter making knobby projections, which were noticed and wondered at. When he returned to New York, after kidnapping your brother, he crossed the river on the water, and was seen by Oakes and his fellow boatmen."

"Then even that had a meaning."

"Yes. Demidoff is an old criminal, and we have heard of him before, but never located him. My aid, disguised as Clover Crookback, was present when your brother's house was burned, and found a foreign-made badge which we had heard of before, as belonging to a dangerous, but unknown, criminal. This came to Nettle's ears, and mystified him. There was much about Old Crookback that puzzled him, and, whether my aid or myself wore the disguise, we never lost any chance to mix him up with true, or misleading statements."

Bradstreet then told more about the peculiar role, as detective-spy, of the book-agent, but Winchester's mind left all other subjects when a messenger-boy arrived with a note from Josiah. It added the single sentence: "I wish you to help reconcile my family to me."

"How can I do that?" Alden asked, in a tremulous voice. "As good as my intentions were, my conduct must seem to them that of a villain!"

"Leave all to me," returned the detective; "and I will see that a reconciliation occurs."

And a reconciliation, such as it was, was brought about, but the Blakes could never be led to believe fully in their New York relative. They could not respect Josiah, either, for he frankly confessed that he had neglected and, finally, abandoned them to save expenses; and when the older brother died, after properly settling all his worldly affairs, they had a curt good-bye to Alden and removed to Albany.

Dudley Leland went with them, his marriage to Leobelle occurring just before the journey.

Carlos Edlock's present address, is at Sing Sing. He had learned the Josiah Winchester secret, and planned to blackmail him, as the letter received the morning after the tragedy proved. Later, rejected as a suitor for Leobelle's hand, he played a bold game to win her by getting both her and her mother into his hands, but his plans were crude, and failed to succeed.

Ruric Demidoff suffered the extreme penalty of law, dying a cool and sneering reprobate.

Steve Ridlon, much to his joy, was told that there was no charge against him, but the failure of the rival detective's case so chagrined Truman Nettle that he left Brooklyn for the West. He is said to be a settler in Oklahoma.

Alden Winchester still lives in New York. He cares well for his brother's grave in Greenwood, and there is no reason to doubt that he was sincere in his position, but his relatives at Albany rarely communicate with him. He admits that pride may have influenced him too much, and wished them well.

Clover Crookback was seen no more in the Twin Cities, but those who had assumed the character kept up their work. When Bradstreet had a case his aid took part, and they had some disguise which either could assume at pleasure, and thus carry on their investigations.

And while Bradstreet's coolness and firmness still kept the sobriquet "Steady Hand" on men's lips, his shrewdness in conducting, and success in ending, cases, daily proved his right to be termed the Napoleon of Detectives.

THE END.

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